Romantic WESTERN

JULY 15¢

6-GUN GRANT by James A. Lawson

Inside Front cover
Misssing page

Romantic Western. July 1938

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The Tested WAY to BETTER PAY

Romantic WESTERN

July, 1938 Vol. 2, No. 6

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ROMANTIC WESTERN is published bi-monthly by Trojan Publishing Corporation, 2242 Grove Street, Chicago, Ill. Editorial and Executive offices at 125 East Forty-sixth Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter October 28, 1937, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Subscription: Yearly, 75c; single copy, 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. Copyright 1938 by Trojan Publishing Corporation. Registration of title applied for at U. S. Patent Office.

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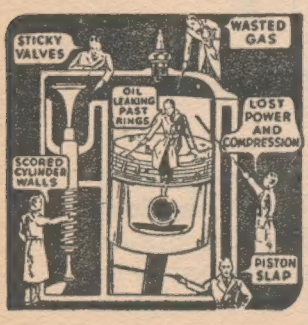

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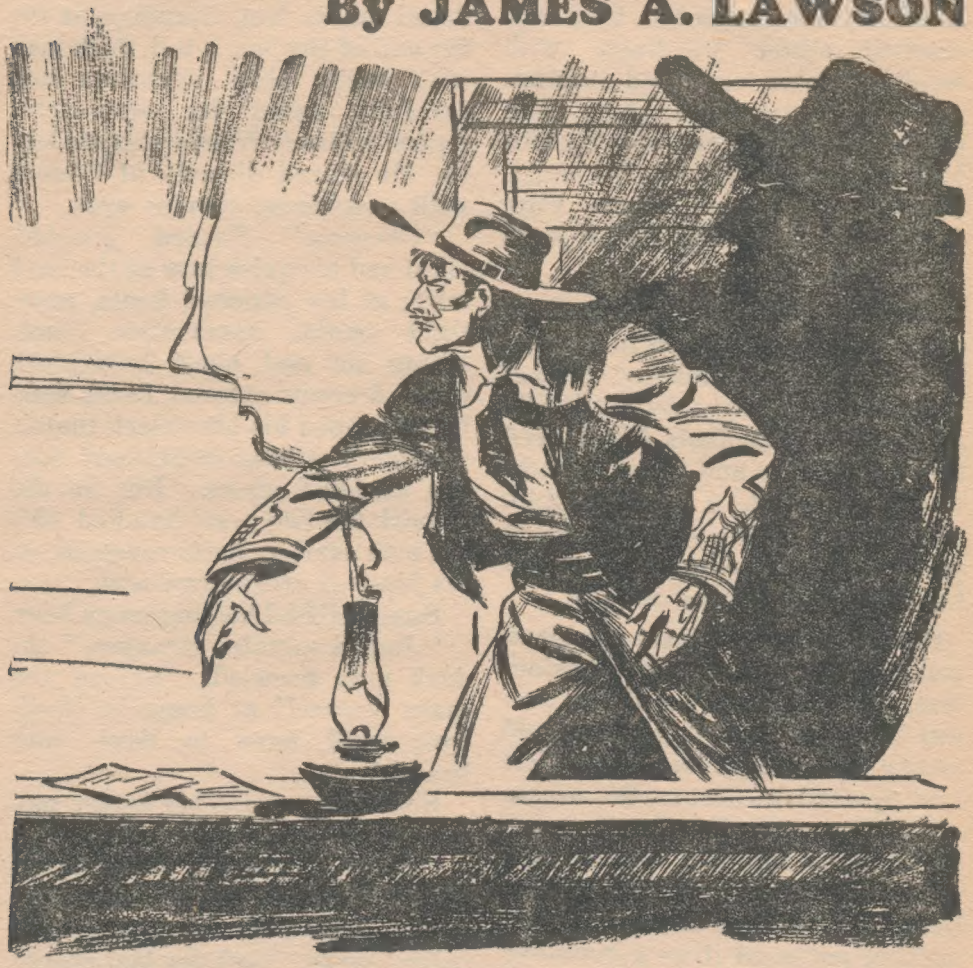
SIX GUN

"Blood is on the moon, senor," Rivera told Sonora Smith, and Sonora knew that the time had come when he must disentangle this web of double-crossing, bring peace to the Valdez Grant, and safety to the girl he loved

A MILE out of Goodbye, Sonora Smith turned off the trail. His bay gelding, Cactus, picked the way between the weed and scrub covered mounds of boothill. Sonora reined up beside a new-made grave and the long fingers of his right hand pushed back his black flat-crowned sombrero. He studied the inscription

GRANT •

By JAMES A. LAWSON



There was a sickening, gruesome sound as the knife found its mark.

on the headboard, and his blue eyes behind a dangling lock of sandy hair seemed to take on a greenish cast.

"Fate Maffitt." He spoke aloud the name of the man buried here. "A devil when you was alive, an' leaving six kinds of hell behind you, now that you're dead."

Sonora turned and took to the trail again. A trail that rose, dipped, twisted through these high, broken Arizona hills. Hills that strung on across the Border into Sonora, Old Mexico. Sonora Smith knew that State down there. His first name was drawn from it. He knew little of this exact locality, and it had been years since he'd mosied around in this country.

Heat waves danced a saraband of Satan over the stunted cedar

and shinnery growth as he broke around a point in the trail and came into Goodbye. It was more a settlement than a town; a crooked, dusty street flanked by a few cracked adobe buildings, with smaller 'dobes scattered haphazardly here and there. On a knoll above the town, a two-story adobe lorded over all. This was the house, Sonora understood, where Fate Maffitt had lived. His widow lived there now.

Cactus' shuffling gait kicked up dust to hang puffballed in the air. A few Mexicans hunkered against building walls surreptitiously lifted serapes from their faces, eyed Sonora sullenly and remained otherwise unmoved. A bearded white man stood in the doorway of a junk-filled second-hand store and trading post, staring stonily.

Sonora's thinnish body remained relaxed, his thin face expressionless. His fingers touched the walnut butt of the triggerless .45 swung on his right leg; moved left and upward to assure the access of a hide-out .38. For Goodbye was all the name implied. Wanted men said "good-bye" to the States here; and the scum of the Border's melting pot used it as a good-bye to many things; a goodly share of them, good-bye to life.

Sullen, suspicious, seething underneath like microbes in a scum-covered, soured pool—this was the life of Goodbye now.

SONORA left his slick saddle that marked the non-working rider of many trails, and hit the ground in front of a cantina. He beat dust off his levis and jumper and pushed his star-stitched halfboots into the gloomy interior.

A Mexican snored off a tequila jag in a corner. A fat bartender dozed on his feet. Standing at the far end of the bar, a tall, dark man with bushy black eyebrows and carefully cared for moustache, sipped whiskey from a private bottle. He stared directly at Sonora with suspicious, corvine eyes.

"*Cerveza,*" Sonora grunted. He'd had his quick look at the dark man; at his polished boots, gray, tight pants, immaculate linen, string tie and black broadcloth coat. A cream-colored Texas sombrero topped his blue-black thatch. Gambler? Cheap politician? Sonora couldn't guess. But he did remark the two pearl-handled .45's the man carried, butts reversed, on his hips. A cross-draw man.

Sonora lifted his lukewarm beer.

"Just a minute, stranger," the dark man growled. "Before you make yourself at home in Goodbye, we'll have to have your brand."

Sonora sat down his bottle, patted himself here and there.

"Sorry," was his sardonic reply. "I plumb forgot my nice, posey-bordered, hand-engraved callin' cards. I left my last stompin' grounds so fast, I never had time to think me of such civilized niceties."

The other had drawn nearer. His face grew darker, his eyes narrowed. "Mister, you're getting funny with the wrong man," he warned in a chilled-tinged voice. "You imply you're on the run. Well, you're not the first one that's come here so. Maybe you'll be welcome; maybe not. Don't forget,

this place is on the Maffitt Ranch. I can put you off any time."

"You don't own the Maffitt Ranch," Sonora complained. "An' I misdoubt *you* could make me move a inch I didn't want to. I didn't *say* I was on the dodge." He raised his bottle to his lips.

The other stepped forward, grabbed his arm. "Listen—"

That arm slipped from under his grasp now and his wrist was pinioned as if in a vise. His own arm was twisted up and back. He ground his teeth with pained, enraged surprise.

"An' don't try for that other gun with your left hand," Sonora warned, his eyes belying the mild reproof of his words. He drank his beer with his own left hand, set the bottle down and let go the other man.

"Now, mister nosey, seein' you're reasonable, I'll give up a li'l head. Smith's the brand. One of that fine ol' army of Smiths. The first name's Sonora. I come here to see Fate Maffitt."

"Maffitt? You fool, Fate Maffitt's dead!"

"Well, well. How time does fly. Well, I'll make me a visit to his widow an' pay my sad respects."

"Bigod, if you've any business with her, you can say it—"

The dark man's mouth closed trappishly and he turned back toward the end of the bar. As Sonora rolled his spurs out and got into the saddle, he mused: "Uh-huh. I'd bet a stack of blues that *hombre* is one Ed Korse. An' I bet me I ain't heard near the last of him!"

He was right in both respects.

HE stopped Cactus at a watering bowl built into the thick adobe of a patio wall, let him drink; tethered him and knocked on an oaken, hand-hewed door. He heard the sluff of rope-soled sandals across tile; a wicket in the door was opened and the brown face of a Mexican *moza* peered suspiciously at him.

"Mrs. Maffitt," Sonora explained. "I wish to see her. An old *amigo* calls."

"The name, *senor*?"

"Tell her to come an' see."

He waited patiently, and told himself, "I got to act surprised, like I don't know who is Fate Maffitt's wife."

Quick footsteps, then, and a pretty, somewhat sullen, fear-stamped face framed in golden hair, appeared at the wicket. The woman put the gaze of her calculating, coldish eyes on him and her full, red lips puckered thoughtfully.

It had been some years since they had met, but she recognized Sonora Smith.

"Sonora!" Myra Maffitt cried.

A bolt lifted and the door swung open. Sonora stepped into the patio. Myra Maffitt laid a heavy revolver on a stone bench, gave Sonora both her hands and held up her lips invitingly.

He ignored those lips—for now. But started to build up fences for the near future. He stood back. "Myra!" he exclaimed. "What're you doin' here?"

She blinked at him. "I thought you knew? Didn't you send in word you were an old friend?"

"Just a dodge to get in," he assured her.

"I'm glad it worked, Sonora.

You see, I'm Fate Maffitt's widow."

He shook his head slowly, looking at her as though still surprised. Dressed in a simple gown that was cut low at the neck and tight to the waist, with a thin, flowing skirt that clung to the full sweep of her legs, she was a picture of appeal.

"Marriage," Sonora stated admiringly, "has made—uh, made you more beautiful than ever."

"I hope you think so." Her voice was low. "It could have been you—once."

"I know it." He forced a groan.

She turned and started through the walled, flowered patio around the house, pausing to pick up the heavy pistol.

"Perhaps it isn't too late, Sonora. Follow me," she said.

CHAPTER II

Valdez Grant

THE long, low, oak-beam ceilinged room was dim and cool. Myra Maffitt closed the door, laid her pistol on a table and motioned Sonora toward a low, deep-cushioned couch. He stepped across a sea of rich Navajo rugs, sat down. Myra Maffitt, arranging her skirt with studied carelessness so her knees would show, curled up facing him.

"Sonora," she demanded abruptly, "what brought *you* here?"

He shrugged. "Last time I saw you, I was ridin' broncs an' six-guns, for a outfit down below Bisbee. Since then, I've been doin' this an' that an' movin' yonderly. Last time I moved, it was in a hurry. A li'l matter of some steers with wet hoofs that was pushed across the Rio Grande."

Myra Maffitt sighed. "I never figured you'd wind up like that, Sonora. You were pretty well thought of. Oh, well—what's the difference! I never thought, when I was singing in that cantina in the old days, I'd wind up as Fate Maffitt's wife. And I sometimes wish I'd not. If you'd married me, when I wanted you. . ."

She sighed again. "I wasn't really a wife to Maffitt—the fat hog! Lots of other men wanted me, and he wanted to show them he was top dog, just as in everything else. He wore me down. After he got me here, he just about forgot me. . . Why'd you come to him?"

"I was on the run, an' I'd heard Fate Maffitt sort of made lots of money, takin' beef from the other side the line, holdin' it in these hills awhile, then sellin' it at high States prices on up the line. I heard he was dead, just today. What happened?"

"I wish I knew," she returned. "Fate was found dead in his boots. Along the trail over into Sonora. Shot five times. . . What else did you hear he was doing? Outside of wet cattle."

"Why, nothin'," Sonora said innocently. "Was there somethin' else?"

"Y—No. Nothing else." Myra bit her lip. She shifted nearer Sonora, the movement pulling her loose skirt higher.

"Sonora," she whispered, her voice vibrant, husky, "never you mind running wet beef. I've got a better job for you. But before I tell you—" her voice broke. "You

refused me once! This time, I'll make you love me. You hear?"

Here it was again. Some funny something about Sonora Smith that compelled women, drew them to him, even against their will. It was something no woman could explain; nobody could; least of all Sonora himself. He knew she had started out to get a hold on him so she might use him for some purpose of her own. Now, her love for him flamed real. And Sonora was never a hairpin to hold impervious to a woman's charms.

Tarnation, he'd sashayed into this country to be used!

Suddenly, her arms were about his neck and she had dragged herself half onto his lap. Her lips sought his and he made sure she found them. Lips that were soft, moist, avid, crushed under his own.

His heart hammered, his temples throbbed as he felt the warmth, the eager softness of her body quivering against him, heard her breath sobbing in her throat.

"Ahh!" She tore away from him, leaned back in his arms, flushed, panting . . . making no attempt to straighten her disheveled clothes. "Wait, Sonora. That—that's just a sample. You understand?"

Thoroughly aroused, he feasted his eyes on her, ran his tongue over his lips, nodded. "What is this job you want done?" he muttered, unsteadily.

"I can't sit here and tell you. Not sanely." She stood, crossed to a carved cabinet and got bottle and glasses out. She poured drinks, handed him one with a hand that was still trembling and sat on the couch away from him. Watching

She looked at him, and the light reflected the bright gleam of pleasure in her eyes; revealed the utter beauty of her slender figure.

her movements, the half-seen play of her body under the thin dress, had restored Sonora's self-control.

"There's a little history I must tell you first."

SONORA knew this history, but he couldn't tell her so.

"In the first place," she began, "this Maffitt ranch was part of an old Spanish grant. Don Carlos Valdez was the first. Years, while the Valdez line ran on, Arizona became an American Territory, Mexico a Republic. Still the grant held. An enormous ranch, on both sides of the Border."

She tasted her drink went on: "Sons and daughters married outside the family. The grant was cut up as this one, that one inherited. Yet, no matter how much it was cut up, it was with the stipulation the entire thing would be under one control. A little nation, the Valdez grant, with the separate members of the family holding little states within."

Sonora nodded. "Well, old Don Lucio was the last of the direct line of the Dons. He died two years ago. Fate Maffitt inherited this part on the United States side, through his mother. Down below the Border, Lois Valdez, a great granddaughter, along with a grandniece, Teresa Clell, inherited the main hacienda. A nephew, whose mother was Mexican and Yaqui Indian, got nothing, save the portion he already held."

"So?" Sonora raised his brows.

"Teresa is a little spitfire. Until two months ago she was under age. Lois Valdez, who is part Irish and part Spanish, was her guardian. She would have nothing to do with Fate, or with the schemes of the nephew, Gitano Valdez. She keeps Teresa a virtual prisoner. Things are in a fine mess!"

"I don't get it."

"Quarreling, getting stuff rustled. Conniving for control. Amounts to that, and more. Fate was trying to get Teresa away, so she could sell to him, or give him a right to manage for her. That would take control away from Lois Valdez.

"Well, when Fate died, Lois sent word I had no right here. Said she'd buy me off or run me off. She knew Fate had been running off her cattle, and she accused me of doing the same. That's not my game. I want to get Teresa Clell up here. I'll be able to handle her. Then, I'll get her rights down there. And when I do, I'll control enough power, enough land to make even the Mexican Government watch out for me. They won't be able to do much, because I'd also have control rights in the United States!"

"Figger on startin' a sort of country of your own, aimin' for Uncle Sam to make faces at Mexico an' scare them off. Which same could cause a lot of trouble," Sonora mused. "There's Yaquis in these hills, Myra, an' renegade Mexes an' whites, waitin' for the pickin's a uprisin' would bring."

"Won't be any," Myra declared. "You get Teresa Clell up here for me, Sonora. Do that, and I'll be queen of a small kingdom!"

She set aside her glass, leaned forward and kissed him.

"And you'll be king," she breathed.

Sonora nodded, forcing a smile to his lips.

"But how'll I get in down there?"

"I think that can be fixed. You see, a lawyer named Ed Korse, was a friend of Fate Maffitt's. He wants power. And the fool thinks I'll give it to him! He's backing me. While Lois Valdez thinks Korse is working to get me to sell to her! Korse can fix it up. He's got men there. But none who'd stand a chance of getting Teresa Clell away from—

"Who is it?" She answered a rapping on the door.

"Ed Korse."

THE hombre Sonora had had it out with in the cantina, came on in. He bowed low to Myra Maffitt, and his probing scrutiny did not miss her rumpled dress, the way her blond hair was mussed. Muscles tightened around his mouth.

"And what is this *gentleman* doing here?" He indicated Sonora.

"Korse, this is Sonora Smith. An old friend of mine. Sonora, Ed Korse. A lawyer and a fighter. He knows about the wet cattle."

Korse stiffened. "Have you told . . . ?" he began.

Myra gave him a heavy look. "*Wet cattle!*" she hissed.

Korse nodded slightly.

"Sonora and I have met before," he said. "So he's an old friend of yours? Hmmmn. Well, Smith, let's drop any enmity we might have. You see, Myra, we stepped on each other's toes, slightly, in the cantina today."

"Sonora is going to get Teresa Clell away from Hacienda Valdez for us," Myra explained. "I'll expect you to pave the way for him."

Korse's white teeth clicked audibly, but he kept a straight face. "Certainly. Oh, yes. I'll pave the way for him. Be sure of it. Smith, it's getting late. You'll ride tomorrow, I suppose." He gave Myra a heated, sidelong look. "I'll send word ahead. When you arrive down there, see the range *segundo*, Wark Reulin. He'll be expecting you."

" *'Sta bueno.* But how'll I know him, an'—?"

"I said I'd take care of things," Korse growled. "You can be *sure* I will."

He bowed mockingly to Myra, to Sonora, and left them there.

Myra came to Sonora's arms, wriggled close to him. "The fool. When we are done using him. . . ." Her eyes held an unspoken promise.

She drew him toward the door. "Come see the rest of the house. I'll show you your quarters, upstairs. I hope you'll . . . you'll like them—Sonora."

Though he felt distaste for her, the remembrance of her kisses, the eager, warm way of her, was still throbbing in his brain. His eyes were held irresistably by the swaying outline of her body as she walked ahead of him. And he was sure he would enjoy his quarters for the night. . . . This might be his last night this side of Hades.

CHAPTER III

Ambush

SUNRISE saw Sonora on his way. Myra walked with him, arm in arm, as far as the patio gate. Her eyes were soft;

there was a smug smile on her lips. She was certain of herself, positive, now that Sonora Smith was hers to command. A gaunt, gash-mouthed man with a puckered scar running from hairline to chin, stood guard by the door in the thick wall.

He lifted the bar, looking blankly at nothing when Myra kissed Sonora good-bye. Sonora gave the man a sidelong glance. Myra laughed. "Don't mind Scar," she said. "He guards the house from dark until after sunup."

"You're afraid—"

"Afraid of Lois Valdez," Myra admitted. Then: "I'll expect you back soon."

"Yeah," Sonora answered, and left her there, feeling the cold, calculating gaze of her on his back. Outside, he found Cactus saddled and waiting. He examined the cinch, the bridle and reins, swung up and rode down the hill toward the settlement. Goodbye slept, like a city of the forgotten.

Sonora turned Cactus due South, along a trail that wound between hills that became rising, serried mountains. He crossed the Border two miles on.

"No wonder no Customs or Immigration Service, no kind of Border Patrol can police this line," he grunted. "A army couldn't do 'er, an' make it stick."

The sun swung on upward and the choking smell of blistered growth became more pronounced. Sonora swung into a slot that was almost too narrow to be called a canyon. The ring of Cactus' shoes on the rocks thundered, it seemed, in Sonora's ears.

"Yaqui Notch, eh?" He named the place aloud. "A fine place for a 'bushin' party. An' it wouldn't surprise me—"

He reined up suddenly. The Notch turned abruptly, and from map and word-gained knowledge aforehand, Sonora knew that more open country prevailed around that turn; country hemmed in by these rising wastes, running to more mountains beyond.

He dismounted, broke his rifle out of the saddle boot and pushed Cactus close to the wall, hunkered on his heels and waited. The heated silence rang in his ears. Sonora's nose wrinkled and he sniffed, then sniffed again. The green light came back into his eyes as he scented the faint stink of rank, Mexican tobacco.

"Maybe just guards. But I don't figger so," he told himself.

A minute, two, five. No sound. Ten minutes.

There came a scraping sound from just around the turn, a sibilant hiss. Sonora raised his rifle. No, not guards, he was satisfied. For his keen eyes had not missed sign. He figured it was sign of two riders he'd glimpsed here and there along the rocky trail this morning. Now, he figured those riders hadn't been so long ahead of him.

He froze. The sun glinted on the barrels of two rifles pushed around the turn ahead of crawling men. Sonora's thin grin was not pleasant. He figured that here was where curiosity might kill a couple cats. Skunks, more likely.

Their heads showed, then. The pock-marked face of a Mexican, the beefy, red, sweaty face of a white man. Their eyes widened,

their mouths flopped open when they saw Sonora hunkered there. He rose to his feet, crouching, as they lunged and flung their rifles up.

The smart crack of carbines increased, swelled in volume as echoes bounced back and forth against the walls of Yaqui Notch. The Mexican's head snapped back as his body plunged forward. Sonora did a sideways hop and winced as a bullet *spatted* on rock beside him and a flying sliver cut his jaw. His rifle spanked more sound.

The beefy-faced man's lips parted from set teeth as he twisted to his feet. Doubled half over, rifle at waist level, he came hurling toward Sonora, murder, rage, pain flaming in his eyes.

Another slug screamed off the rock back of Sonora.

"A'right!" Sonora breathed the word grimly. His rifle spoke once more. The big man seemed to bounce back, then come forward again by the momentum he had gained. Came forward falling in a twisting, final way, his carbine falling away from him.

For long, long moments, Sonora stood there motionless. His ears rang to gunsound and his nose wrinkled against burnt powder's acrid stench. He shook his head, slowly, regretfully. Fools, he thought, throwing away their lives like this. Sonora Smith was never a man to pleasure in taking another's life.

He stepped past the red-faced man, around the Mexican. They had horses just around the turn. Sonora brought the animals back. He was glad when the job was done, and they were tied face down across their saddles.

AS HE rode on, his gruesome burdens led behind Cactus, Sonora's jaw was ridged, determined. He was going to work plenty fast down here. Had to—or he wouldn't live to do his work at all.

He tried to figure this ambush as he broke out onto a sandy, cacti-splotched open. He might be wrong on one point: perhaps these two were not the riders whose sign he'd seen on the trail from Goodbye. Maybe those two had ridden to Hacienda Valdez and given warning of his approach.

He wasn't forgetting Ed Korse's promise to "take care of him—for sure," either. Myra, and Korse. But why would they try to have him killed, seeing Myra was so anxious to get her paws on Teresa Clell?

"Maybe Miss Lois Valdez can give me the answer. An' maybe, when I haul these two in, her actions'll show me how the cat hops without her sayin' a single word," he allowed.

He shrugged. There would be one down here who would know something. That someone he aimed to see. Pronto.

The range became dotted with cattle and he topped a rise. Below him rested the old Valdez hacienda, still in all the glory of its ancient, more commanding days.

A high 'dobe wall enclosed the two-story, rambling old place. From this eminence, Sonora could see the pepper trees thrusting over the wall around the place. Outside, scattered over a wide area, were stables, 'dobe dwellings for the

haciendas, the workers, the vaqueros and their families.

There was a little line of buildings: cantina, trading store, smithy. Sonora could visualize this place as it once might have been: teaming with activity. Now there were hardly signs of people, of work at all.

He was within two hundred yards of the casa before anybody paid the slightest attention to him. A *peon* unwound from a lazing position and pointed. Others gave their attention then. Someone yelled.

Straw-hatted *peons, vaqueros* in faded finery, shawled women and naked babies, gaunt, barking, snarling dogs seemed to erupt from 'dobe *jacals,* the store and cantina, everywhere.

Dust fogged up and the din increased. Sonora pulled up. They ganged around him, jabbering, pointing. Yet for all of this noise, an indifference marked these people; they showed no animosity toward Sonora Smith.

Double gates in the casa walls opened. A woman came hurrying through. Behind her followed a short, chunky, blank-faced gringo and a towering, stern-faced Mexican.

Sonora's eyes got wide and his breath made a sucking sound. The sun glinted on coppery-bronze hair piled on her head. Her face was oval, marked by a fine little nose and lips that were made to be kissed—but looked like they had not been used to it. Her skin was faintly, delicately olive where it showed in the V of her silken, full-sleeved blouse. The sun had not browned her; it had tanned her in a delicious way. The proud blood of old Castile, the quick blood of old Erin showed in this woman.

Proud, taunting beauty, this. Involuntarily, Sonora stared at the vague outline of her firm, small figure. Lushly moulded curves melted downward to the tapered perfection of sculptured legs revealed by close-fitting riding breeches.

She stopped, and a shudder ran over her at sight of the dead. The big Mexican was expressionless. The blocky white man's eyes went wide and he crooked his elbows, his fingers played above his guns. Then his face straightened and he dropped his arms.

"Ma'am—*Senorita*—I'm Sonora Smith," Sonora said. "These *hombres* made the mistake of tryin' to ambush me. Is that the way this place welcomes gents who come ridin' for a job?"

"*Senor* Smith," the girl said, her liquid voice running a thrill through Sonora, "I have never set eyes on those men before! You have the word of *Senorita* Lois Valdez for that."

Her eyes, deep, liquid, discerning, fastened themselves on Sonora's face. She blinked, and seemed to sway toward him. Then a mask seemed to be pulled on her face.

"I have no regard, no use for killers," she said sharply. "But," her voice softened, "I may have a place for a man who knows—how to—protect himself. You will talk to me?"

Sonora swung down. A word from the big Mexican, and the rabble of spectators scattered hurried-

ly. The two-gun toting white man put in his say.

"Miss Valdez, I figger it's me who ought to talk to this *hombre,*" he growled.

"Wark Reulin, you may talk to him after while," Loise answered haughtily. "Your place. Please remember it."

Reulin stood aside. His look at Sonora was a threat; and Sonora's look in return was a warning.

The big Mexican following, he went with Lois Valdez inside the high walls. Sonora's heart hammered, and his head was somehow in the clouds. But his guns were in their holsters and his feet were on the ground.

CHAPTER IV

Behind the Walls

BIRDS rocked in the lacy retreats of the pepper trees, bees hummed over the flowered beds, and tropical fish darted in a pool. Here in the great patio, the world seemed at peace.

Sonora looked at the house, and for an instant, his attention was drawn upward toward a balcony. He had a brief glampse of a girl's face peering from an open door off that balcony; a full, rounded face with red lips that puckered petulantly, and dark eyes that flamed their sudden interest as she looked down on this new man. Sonora gained the impression that men, new men, would always interest her.

The girl drew back. Lois Valdez led the way into an inner patio in the center of the U-built casa. She seated herself at a small, shaded table and motioned Sonora to follow suit.

"Ah! I—Senor—Sonora. It's Teresa, you fool. Put down that gun."

"Toro, you may go," she said to the shadowing big Mexican. "That is Toro Frias, my Major Domo—as far as I may trust anyone to handle what few affairs are left to be handled," she explained, a look of sadness shadowing her face.

A *mozo* in white pants and corded sandals placed wine before them, but the girl did not offer to drink as yet. Her dark eyes were on Sonora, probing, questing his very soul.

"What b r i n g s you here, Sonora?" she asked abruptly.

He shrugged. "I wanted a job," he answered. "I asked around in Goodbye, an' didn't get nowhere. So I rode down here. Them two strange *hombres* laid for me. An' here I am."

"You heard we were having trouble? That my cattle are being rustled, I am being pushed from all sides by relatives who would like to see me out of here? Have you noticed—outside? The workers idle and we go broke, Sonora. There is a woman holding part of the old Valdez Grant that lies on the Arizona side. Her husband was a thief. Perhaps worse. He sought to gain control after the death of Don Lucio. I have tried to buy her out. A lawyer, Ed Korse, who understands my pride in this place, and my struggle to bring it back as a pride to this country, is trying to buy her out for me."

"I heard a li'l about that," Sonora said easily. "Didn't pay much mind to it. I think I heard somebody say you'd aimed to run her out?"

She drew herself up. "Unthinkable!" she declared.

He nodded agreement. Then, "You hold this place, alone?"

"No. I have a relative. A Teresa Clell, just come of age. She does not like it here."

"Then why does she stay?"

"Because, she is watched. It is not best she leave. She is hot-blooded, a little foolish. She might throw her interest here the wrong way, and let those who would disrupt this country, make of it a place of revolutionists and thieves and scum, get enough control to run me out.

"The lawyer, Korse, advises against her leaving, too. She listens to him. Lately, she seems not inclined to leave."

Korse! What was his game? Telling Myra to hang on, telling Lois he was trying to get Myra to sell. He had been back of the idea of getting Teresa out of here. Yet he'd told Teresa not to go, and advised Lois to have her watched.

SONORA'S head was spinning as he tried to figure this.

He remembered Wark Reulin's actions when he saw those dead men. Reulin knew them, all right. And, bigod, Reulin was going to do some talking before this day was done!

Lois was watching his face. "You seem upset," she said.

"Me? Why, no. I just can't figger why you are tellin' me all this."

"Perhaps I feel the need of someone to confide in," she evaded. "Perhaps I instinctively trust you. You seem able to take good care of yourself. Perhaps, again, that is why I think I shall give you a job. There are things going on here; things I do not understand. More than cattle rustling, more

than squabbling for control of the Valdez Grant is going on—I think. What, I do not know."

Sonora blinked at her. She forced a laugh. "You wonder at me, I see," she mocked. "You cannot understand why I take you in as I do. Shall we say, then, I am at the point where I am desperate? And also that I do not think you came here for a job alone? Here I may watch you, don't you see?"

Look out for a female who tries to disarm you with truth! This was Sonora's thought. He laughed.

"Nope. All I am is a horse breaker, Miss Valdez."

She reached for the wine, long lashes lowered. Softly, then: "And also a breaker of hearts, I believe."

Across raised glasses, their eyes met. There was a challenge in the way their glances clashed. It was Lois who blushed and looked away.

She got herself in hand. "We have a horse breaker for what few poor animals are left to us. But you may see him. He is Riente Rivera, but recently come here as a *vacquero*, a range rider. He became the horse breaker when the other man was mysteriously knifed."

Sonora pushed back. "I'll hunt him up an' see where I bunk," he told her.

"No. You will stay here, in the house." She pointed to a corner room, off the balcony that ran all around this inner patio. "You may stay there."

"So you can watch me?"

She smiled. "My quarters are there, just off this patio. Perhaps I want to be able to look up—and know you are near."

Sonora rose, assuming a mocking air of extreme indifference, that intrigued and goaded the sleeping, unsounded instincts of the girl—as he intended that it should. Light steps sounded on the narrow stairs of the lefthand balcony.

He turned his head. The girl he'd glimpsed at the outer window when coming in, swept up to them. Swept was the only word Sonora could find for it.

Her crimson dress was slashed deeply to a point low on her breast. All the allure of her twenty-one years was in her supple young body. Her dress fitted skin-tight over full hips and thighs. At the knees, it flared outward in a rustling flounce.

She stopped, one hand to the comb topping her piled black hair, one hand on her hip, posed so every true feature of her was faithfully outlined.

A curtain seemed to fall over Lois's eyes.

"*Senorita* Teresa Clell," she said with dignity, "I present to you *Senor* Sonora Smith."

"The gunman, eh?" Teresa gibed. "Hi, Sonora. You can call me Teresa, Tess, or any old thing—as long as you call me." She winked.

She turned to Lois, and her petulant features hardened and there was a challenge in her manner. "You figure to take up all his time, dear relative?" she demanded.

"Sonora's time is for work," Lois reproved.

"And what work!" Teresa jeered. "Well, Sonora, don't take outside work too seriously. I'd show you around, only a distant relative of mine is coming to call."

"Lois, I told you I didn't want

Gitano Valdez here."

"And I do!" Teresa turned away.

"Excuse me," Sonora put in.

As he started away, Lois, determination in her voice, called: "You will have dinner with me tonight?"

Her invitation was a challenge to Teresa.

Sonora nodded and got out of there. He was sweating, yet grinning, a broad expression of anticipation all over his face.

Outside the walls, he blinked into the afternoon sunlight. A few signs of life centered around the cantina. He bent his steps that way.

"You!"

Sonora stopped, turned.

Wark Reulin came from the shade of the store. His knees were bent and he walked in a crouch; his elbows were crooked so both of his hands brushed his guns.

CHAPTER V

The Laughing Bronc Buster

SONORA, feet planted wide apart, deliberately placed both hands behind his back. Wark Reulin stopped a double arm's length away.

"You got killin's to explain," Reulin ground out. "An' the explanation'd better be damn good."

"Meanin' to say you don't know who sent me here?" Sonora lightly inquired. "Didn't Korse send you word to put me on here, like he said he would?"

"Korse? I don't know nothin' about Korse," Reulin denied.

"Oh. So Korse didn't send you word. Well, well. It looks like Korse is crossin' up on you. Just like he's deucin' a lot of other folks."

He saw Reulin's face set, his eyes narrow suspiciously and with pointed anger. He drove his wedge of dissension deeper.

"Myra Maffitt an' Korse sent me here. Of course, you know Korse is aimin' at workin' her. He let me come on, an' put them two dead ones to get me before I got here. So I reckon he figgered they was no need to tell you more than needed."

Reulin straightened, passing a hand over his face in a nervous, puzzled manner. "You knew them two, all right, an' they was Korse's men—maybe workin' for Myra's wages," Sonora grunted. "What'd you do with the bodies?"

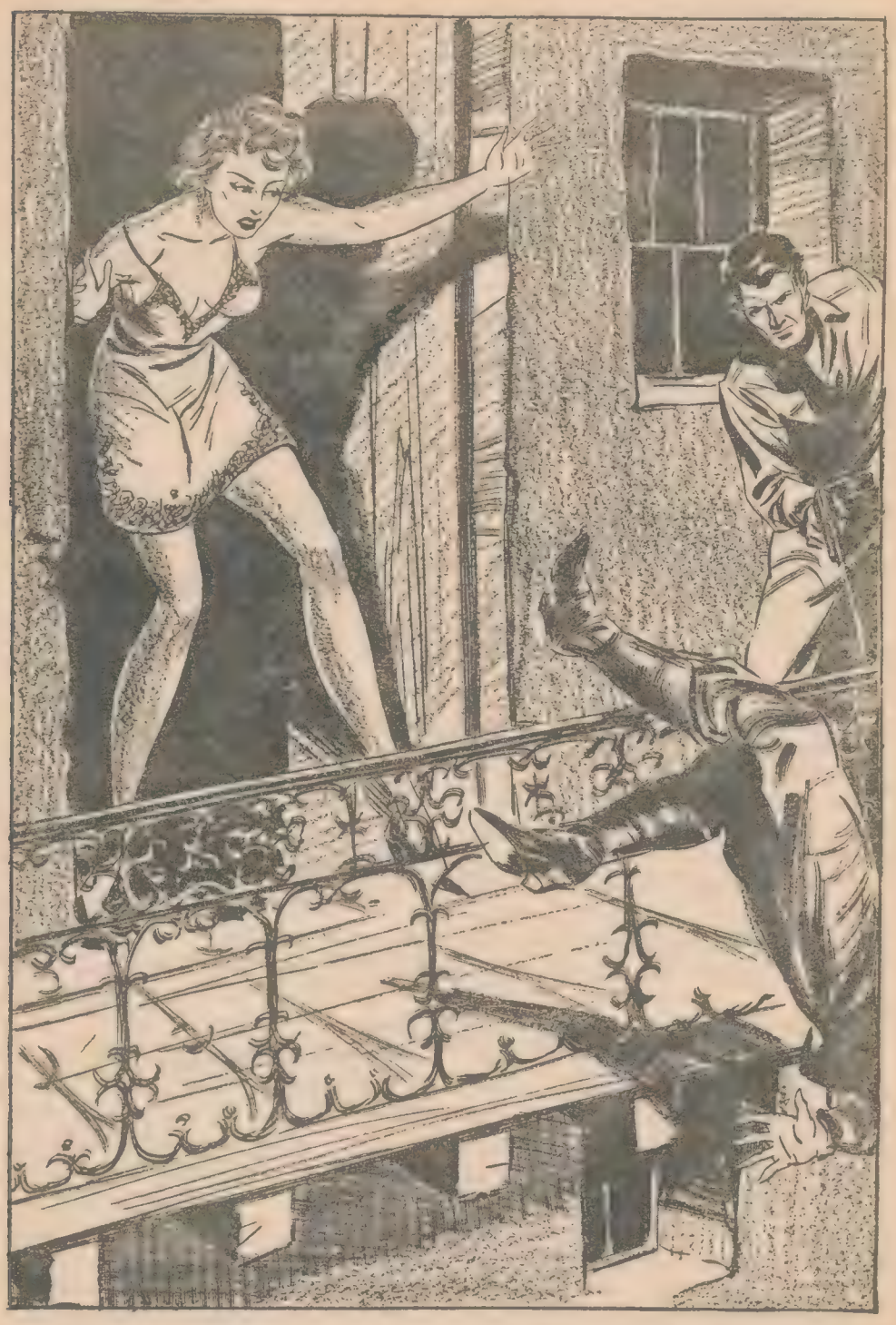
"They're bein' planted," Reulin growled. He shook himself. "You never mind that! Bigod, this gets worse all the time. You wait until Korse gets here, mister quickshot. We'll see."

"Sooooo. You aren't goin' to send him word," Sonora jeered. "You want to see how he'll act when he heads in an' finds I ain't leaded out. *You* got a li'l private nest of your own that you figger on featherin'."

"Never mind what I got," Reulin snarled. He spun on his heel and walked away.

Sonora started on toward the cantina. There were a few *peons* loafing in the little place, with its scant stock of liquor, crude bar and homemade tables and rawhide-bottomed chairs. Sonora looked at the shelved bottles back of the bar.

Tizevin, a Yaqui-originated liquid dynamite; *pulque, mescal, tequila,* and a rotten, tobacco-juice



Riker slammed against the rail, teetered, then toppled over.

brand of States whiskey. He chose *tequila* as the lesser of evils and filled his glass.

A slender little Mexican with bright, buttonlike eyes and a little mustache, dressed in the shirt, levis and boots of an *Americano vaquero,* lounged through the low doorway. His face was crinkled and his white teeth showed from the grin that seemed set perpetually on his lips.

A six-gun hung expertly on his right leg, and the hilt of a bowie knife protruded from the broad leather belt around his slender waist.

He ordered a tequila and turned to Sonora, chuckling all the while. "Ah, *Senor* Sonora," he bowed. And a slow wink went with that bow. "From *Senorita* Valdez have I receive word you are a snapper of broncs. Me, I am Riente Rivera, of which she spoke."

"Laughin' Rivera, eh?" Sonora answered. He was infected with Riente Rivera's grin and chuckle and smiled broadly back. "You laugh because—"

"Come, sit down. *Here* we may talk quietly. Sometimes the public place goes for much more privacy," Rivera interrupted.

THEY took bottle and glasses to a table by the opposite wall. The overall-clad bartender sighed relief and leaned on the bar to catch a little siesta. They were not ambitious nor inquisitive, these people of Hacienda Valdez. They seemed resigned, content as long as they could loaf the days away.

"I laugh," Rivera said softly, when they were seated, "because the fat *ladrone* who was the bronc snapper, was a go-between for someone here—I know not or care not who—and Gitano Valdez. He was also careless, and my knife was rusty. But it was a fair fight." He chuckled again, dryly.

"You learned anything yet?" Sonora asked.

Rivera shrugged. "Some. But the plot, she is so spread, and the complications, they are so many. Me, I am sure of this: This Gitano Valdez is very mad he is left out of Don Lucio's last will. He wishes all of Valdez Grant, as do so many others."

"You think, then, that the guns, the ammunition, are being run down here to him?"

"I am almost positive. But, so far, I have not found where they are. But, patience. I shall. There is one Pepita Nafrio who live with her grandma between here and the hacienda of Gitano. He calls on her, and so do I. Ah, she is wonderful, and I progress."

"Yeah?" Sonora's eyes twinkled. This Riente Rivera, a secret operative for the Army of The Republic of Mexico, was a man after Sonora's own heart. Chief Inspector Howser, of the Border Patrol, had told him Riente would be, and Sonora believed that now.

"You bet. *Seguro Miguel!* Pepita's *abuela,* grandma, is very strict *duenna.* But she like me. The other night, I ride to eat *frijoles* with them. Soon, Grandma goes from the *jacal.* Pepita, she move very close to me and is say, 'Now, Riente, is your chance'."

"An' you went to town, huh?"

"Oh, but no. You see, of *frijoles,* I am so fond. I have already eat

until I am ashamed. But still I crave *frijoles*. So, when Pepita say my chance is come, I jump up and eat what has been left of those so-good beans. *Si!*"

When Sonora stopped laughing, he demanded, "An' Pepita?"

"She get mad. But it make her determine to—what we say?—make me. I have promised, in a vague way, to be nice if she find out what Gitano Valdez is up to."

Rivera drank, became serious. "Sonora, it is bad. They run cattle into the States, use the money for guns and bullets, which are brought back down here. You know how the peons are. Give them a gun, some bullets, and they are for everything, anything. And the Yaquis, Sonora. *You* know those fierce, proud ones, hating Mexico, are not to be laughed off.

"In these unsettled times, it would be possible for this part of Sonora to be taken from the government, and held for a long time. Possibly, the movement would grow. And, with Valdez Grant crossing into Arizona, with Americans mixed in this, it is possible grave complications between our countries would be forced. Neither nation wishes that!"

Sonora nodded. "You savvy, Rivera," he said, "I got no *real* authority this side of the line. I'm workin' with the knowledge of the Border Patrol, an' your officials. But if I get my tail in a crack, she's my tail, my bad luck. If I can scotch these gringoes an' get clear, fine. It's your part to work on your countrymen; me, on mine."

"Agreed. And now, a last drink, and I think it best I not see you until tomorrow, at the main corral. *Salude.*"

AS THEY started out, Rivera drew back. A rider had swept up to the *casa* and dismounted. A rider in huge, bangled sombrero; velvet jacket over a shirt of white silk; tight, velvet pants with flaring bottoms over fine, soft boots. A silver-chased pistol, a carved-hilted knife were thrust into a flowing sash.

The man's dark, hawkish face showed mixed strains of temper, wildness, devil-may-care madness.

"Bad blood; Yaqui, Spanish, Mexican," Rivera grunted. "That is Gitano Valdez, Sonora. Eight, nine miles in the hills South, is his place. He runs no cattle—of his own."

Gitano Valdez looked around. Wark Reulin appeared from seeming nowhere. "*Senor* Reulin," Gitano called loudly. "It is you who will care for my mount?"

"Sure," Reulin answered, coming near. Their lips moved swiftly, and Gitano's face twisted, his teeth flashed. They seemed to be arguing, deciding something of great import. At last, Gitano went on through the gate into the big patio.

"There is a part of things," Rivera whispered to Sonora. "There are many parts, Sonora; too many! Mexico wishes to see the heirs keep Valdez Grant, and will help to build it back. But who is the right one to manage that? Lois? Teresa? And what of the Maffitt claim?"

"When we settle that," Sonora replied, "we can go to work. Yeah,

with our six-guns in our paws."

He parted with Rivera, entered the big house and paused to speak to the old Major Domo, Toro Frias. Yes, Sonora's horse was well cared for, Toro assured him. And this man was Pablo, who would guard the gate and the stairway tonight.

Sonora went on to his room on the balcony overlooking the inner patio. Of Gitano, Teresa, Lois, there was no sign. He poured water from an *olla* into a bowl, washed, sat down on a rawhide-bottomed bunk covered with Indian blankets and Navajos, and tried to see a way through this mess. He was cussing his inability to do this when a *mozo* rapped on his door and told him it was the wish of *Senorita* Valdez that he come to her quarters downstairs.

CHAPTER VI

A Whisper in the Dark

THE sun was dropping, the scent of flowers hung heavy in the cooling air as Sonora went down. He rapped, and opened the door as Lois' liquid voice bade him enter. Inside, he stopped. His breath made a sobbing sound as it stuck tight in his throat!

Shutters had been closed and deep, rich light from scented candles made a background for Lois Valdez. She lay back, one bare, slender arm under her head, reclining on a low, rug-and-pillowed covered couch.

Sonora got his breath and his devouring eyes swept swiftly over the girl, starting at her feet, small and trim in black slippers with high, red heels. Dark, cobweb-sheer stockings covered those lovely legs until they disappeared under a flowing skirt. The skirt was topped by a broad band around her slim waist, and a portion of smooth, exposed whiteness peeped from under the bottom of a lacey, black shawl which, draped around her, formed the upper portion of her dress.

She looked at him, and the low light reflected the bright gleam of pleasure, of excitement in her dark, deep eyes. Sonora gulped, managed to pull himself back to a half-way indifferent attitude.

She sat up, swinging her feet to the floor and, as her dress swirled up and then down, he glimpsed delicately tinted skin above the tops of the stockings that were held high by garters with huge rosettes. He wondered if there might be a stiletto thrust under one of those encircling bands.

She motioned a place beside her, clapped her hands. A *moza* appeared silently from another room. Crystal, fine linen and silver were spread on a small table before them. Sonora remembered little of that meal, though he knew it was not the rare old vintages that made his head go round.

The meal was done finally, and they were again alone.

She turned to face him, and he could follow the heart-warming outline of lilting curves quite clearly beneath the lace shawl. The naive sensuousness of the girl, the frank allure of her costume was fast driving him loco. Had to ride with spurs and claw the biscuit if he didn't want to get pitched, he cautioned himself.

"Sonora," she crooned. "Am I lovely?"

"That ain't the name for it," he stated positively.

"You find me different, then, than the girl who must worry, be suspicious, try and perhaps fail to handle the affairs of this place?"

"You're always beautiful," he said warily.

She leaned toward him and the delicate perfume of her, the vibrant sense of her nearness stirred him deeply. "Sonora," her voice was a fluttering whisper. "Sonora, I have never had a sweetheart. How—how much have I missed?"

"You'll never know, until you've tried," he managed.

She rose suddenly, stood before him for a second and with a little cry that was half a sob, flung herself onto his lap, into his arms.

Dynamite exploded inside Sonora Smith. It was a game she played, and he knew it. Yet he caught her to him savagely, thrust her head back and slowly, slowly pressed his lips down on hers.

She trembled, eyes wide—frightened, and he could feel her stiffen in his arms. And then that rigidity slowly melted. Her eyes became twin misted stars that darkened as her lashes drooped slowly over them and she leaned back, lips parted and moist, the tip of her tongue pink between them, a happy little whimper dragging out of her.

"Sonora," she breathed. "I—I didn't know!"

He bent, kissed the hollow at the base of her slender throat. She lay back in his arms as one bemused, heedless of the shawl that slipped from round, velvet skinned shoulders, not seeming to realize or care what the sight of their perfection did to Sonora Smith. He held her nearer, savoring each precious second of the warmth and softness of her. Her breathing became more violent and beneath the rise and fall of her breast Sonora knew her heart was beating a delirious echo of his own.

Outside, a mocking bird cut loose in a pepper tree. It was a night for love. . . .

"Sonora, *Amante*—No!" Lois choked. She was trembling, and tears wet her long lashes. Ecstasy, a hungering she knew not how to appease shook the girl, entranced and yet frightened her.

She sobbed as she thrust back and swirled to her feet. Panting, she stood away from him, and gradually regained a bit of her composure; assumed once more her role of coquettery.

"One must — not learn — too quickly," she warned.

"Ain't no use waitin' *too* long, though," Sonora wheezed.

She came back and sat down a decorous distance from him.

"Perhaps," her eyes lowered, "it will not be too long." Then her head whipped up, her voice suddenly was tense. "I must know about you, Sonora, why are you here? Those two men. I lied. I know they were Myra Maffitt's men. You could not be working for her, or else they would not try to kill you. Or, maybe it was planned that way. Perhaps two lives meant nothing if you got in with me?"

So here it was, Sonora told himself.

"I have told you the truth," he said. "I come here for a job."

"That is not all the truth!"

His lips made a determined line. He wasn't to be dragged on this way. For all he knew, Korse and Lois might be the big ones in this deal. He had an idea a talk with Teresa might throw a little light on that.

"I come for a job," he repeated stubbornly.

Her eyes flashed, but there was a sob in her voice as she said, "Very well, Sonora. *Buenas noches.*"

"Good night," he answered, and left her standing there.

HE went silently up to his room, but did not go to bed. He sat there, a cold cigarette stuck to his lips, watching the heady moonlight that poured into the inner patio. The notes of the mocking bird in the pepper tree stilled.

A door opened silently far down the line. Sonora saw the moving shadow of it swinging out. Two figures were touched by the moonlight as they stood there in the doorway. Teresa Clell and Gitano Valdez.

In the deep silence, their whispering, low voices carried farther than they believed. Sonora, straining his ears, caught words and phrases.

"It is some game," Gitano insisted. "Korse. Perhaps he suspects. Tomorrow night . . . you will be safe enough. This Sonora. . . ."

After that, Sonora heard Gitano bidding Pablo, the night guard in the patio, good night.

Casa Valdez seemed to sleep. Under a mantle of intrigue and counter intrigue, suspicion and restlessness.

Sonora closed his door and sat down to pull off his boots.

"I never saw so many sons out tryin' to do somebody else. She's my guess Korse is crossin' Myra an' all the rest. I don't know where Teresa an' Lois fit in, or with who. But," he smiled grimly into the darkness as he lay back on the cot, "the more they connive an' buck each other, the easier it's goin' to be for me!"

It seemed he had no more than closed his eyes than he opened them to the light of a new day. He washed, dressed, and went quietly down the stairs. Toro directed him to a room on the outer patio, and he ate a solitary breakfast there, then went outside. There were smells of breakfast and fires in the air, and morning sounds. But no riders going out, none coming in. Nobody worked if they could get out of it.

Sonora leaned against an empty 'dobe *jacal* and shook his head. "*Beunos dias,* Sonora." Riente Rivera rounded the hut and stopped.

"You're an early bird," Sonora grinned.

"Perhaps the bird," Rivera chuckled, "that does not go to bed. Come, we have a morning drink."

They kicked the sleepy barkeep to life off his pallet behind the bar. Drinks before them, Rivera waved the man away.

"Last night, I pay another call to my Pepita. Ah, my friend, she is soft like swan's fuzz; her lips are like—"

"What did she say with those lips—after you got her Grandma soused, most likely?"

"You have sixth sense." Rivera

The figure on the bed jerked, started to cry out.

seemed aggrieved. He laughed. "But she tell me something. Gitano Valdez has bragged to her that soon he will be one of the biggest men in Mexico, with a small army to command. So, we wait a bit. She will learn more."

Sonora had no better plan to offer. He agreed. He loafed half the morning. It was after ten when a cloud of dust showed on one of the trails coming in from Goodbye. Sonora left the shade of a building and went to meet Ed Korse.

CHAPTER VII

The Noose Tightens

FOR a moment, Ed Korse's dark face twisted and his eyes went cloudy. Then, a diabolical grin on his face, he dismounted. Thumbs hooked under his cartridge belt, Sonora eyed him blandly.

"You surprised to see me, Korse?" he grinned.

"Surprised? No. Why should I be?"

"Seein' two men tried to 'bush me, an' *you* hadn't told Reulin I was comin'—" Sorona shrugged.

Korse shook his head. "Why, I did send a man to tell him," he lied. "So, two men tried to kill you, huh? Well, Smith, that looks like a woman's work. Myra—"

"Had no chance to hatch anything the other night," Sonora jeered. He saw Wark Reulin approaching, gave Korse a meaning look, turned and strolled away. The rope, Sonora figured, was playing out. Pretty soon, now, somebody was going to hang themselves.

He went back to the cantina and lounged there awhile. Korse had been inside the *casa* for a long time. Once, he saw Reulin and a scar-faced, heavily armed man talking together near one of the scattered huts. He inquired of a *vaquero* who that one might be.

"Heem? Oh, he ees Jap Riker. Bad *hombre*. Them Reulin keep heem around." The man shrugged indifferently.

That evening, there were no signs of Lois or Teresa. Sonora saw Korse take the Goodbye trail along about sundown. He ate alone, idled and talked with Toro Frias awhile, and took himself to bed. Inaction was irking him. But it was his job to handle Korse, and Myra, and maybe Reulin. It was Riente Rivera's task to handle the rest. They wanted this thing done quietly, and without stepping on the toes of the States or Mexico.

It was quiet throughout the big place. A dog howled somewhere beyond the *casa* walls; the notes of a guitar tinkled into nothingness. Sonora, shirt unbuttoned, boots off, finished his bunk-time smoke as he sat on the side of his cot. He stood up, then stiffened in his tracks.

Very slowly, very slowly, footsteps sounded on the balcony. Coming toward his room. Easily, Sonora took his .38 from under his pillow and stuck it back into the holster he had not yet removed from under his left armpit. He placed his .45 on the floor just under the edge of the cot, and lay down on his side, where he could see the door.

THE soft sound of footsteps was outside the door now. And then the latch clicked and the door was opened slowly, letting a thin stream of moonlight through. The stream widened, and Sonora could hear the quick gasps of uneven, excited, rapid breathing.

He sat up suddenly, sweeping the .45 up in his hand.

"A'right!" he whispered.

"Ah! I—*Senor*—Sonora. It's Teresa, you fool. Put down that gun."

He grunted. Teresa—The soft words between Teresa and Gitano

Valdez, the night before, there on the balcony, were brought back to Sonora's mind. "It is some game . . . Korse. Perhaps he suspects . . . Tomorrow night—you will be safe enough. . . ."

"Very nice," he told himself as he swung his feet to the floor. "They think I'm here as a spy for Korse? The rotten cutthroats! Ever'body out to slam a knife in somebody else's back!"

As Teresa came slowly toward him, he asked, "What brings you here?"

She didn't answer directly. She had stopped where a square of moonlight swam in through open shutters. Sonora tried to swallow the lump in his throat, make his breath come evenly.

Teresa was clad in a light, filmy gown, with open sandals on her feet. Where she'd gotten that outfit, he couldn't guess, but it looked like pictures he'd seen of Roman ladies getting ready to splash around in those big, stone horse-troughs folks seemed to cotton to back in those days.

She half turned, so she would be between Sonora and the moonlight, and the silhouette of full, shapely legs, and moulded hips was a picture blazed into Sonora's eyes and seared on his brain.

"Why'd you come here," he gasped.

She moved, sat down beside him. Some strange perfume struck him like a physical blow, and as she leaned, her voice a shivery whisper, her hair tickled his face.

"I was lonesome. I had to talk to *some one.* There's something about you, cowboy, that makes me want to know more—about you. I don't see many men here. Lois is jealous."

"Why don't you leave, then?"

"Why? Because I'll run this place some—I mean—Well, I'd never make it. I'd be caught."

"How about this Myra Maffitt? Wouldn't she help you?"

"Fate Maffitt tried that. I wouldn't be fooled by him. No more than I will by that Myra. But—you? What brings you here? Is it that Korse wants somebody to watch this place?"

"Korse an' me ain't friends. He tried to have me killed."

"Then what *are* you doing here?" she insisted.

"Waitin' around for horses to bust," he assured her.

She leaned suddenly, very close and one of her soft arms went around his neck. Her breath was warm on his cheek.

Slowly, Sonora's arms enfolded her. He drew her to him, then raised one hand and stroked her hair. His lips brushed hers, lightly. There had been a hard determination in this girl's eyes. Now, a moonbeam revealed a changing light in them. They became very wide open. She stirred, and the thin gown crawled above her knees.

With a sudden ardor that was almost furious in its intensity, she dragged his head down toward her. A little gasp escaped her as his lips found the pulse pounding in her throat.

"*Sonora!*"

She was a raging torrent engulfing him. He felt a numbness, a lethargic, hypnotic spell possess-

ing him as he feasted his eyes on her loveliness. Yet, his lips on hers, the warmth of her burning against him, he sensed her for what she was. A she-devil, and he could well imagine her playing men against men and men against women to gain her own ends. A man might think she was his, only to find out, to his sorrow, he was hers.

SONORA ground his teeth and pushed away from her. He forced himself to a calmness he hadn't figured he could command.

"You best go back to your room," he growled.

She gasped, shuddered, and flung suddenly to her feet.

"You think you're getting away with this," she raged. "You figure to be smart, do you? There's only one answer to that: Another woman. And it's a cinch, Sonora Smith, it isn't dear, prudish little Lois. Myra Maffitt, is it? Korse warned me. Well—you fool—"

She glided outside and ran down the balcony. Sonora stepped out, cursing her under his breath. She reached her door, opened it as Sonora came after her, half haltingly.

He stopped, then, and his right hand speared under his shirt and the moonlight glinted on the .38 hideout gun that came into his right hand.

A man stepped out of Teresa's room, let out a roar and leaped toward him. The yellow, full moonlight touched a scarred, twisted face, wild with the lust to kill. Teresa stood in her doorway and began to scream at the top of her lungs.

The man coming toward Sonora, Jap Riker, with whom Reulin had talked that afternoon, lined down his six-gun and fired.

CHAPTER VIII

Blood Moon

SONORA'S .38 made a lighter sound against the smash of the other's weapon. He had stepped aside, felt the hot breath of a slug as it almost creased his body, and heard the dull chunk of it in the wall back of him.

Doors were slamming open and he could hear Pablo, the night guard in the patio, yelling as he came on the run. Somewhere in the house, the voice of the Major Domo, Toro Frias, came bawling out. And Teresa continued to stand in the doorway and scream at the top of her healthy lungs.

Sonora, crouched, moved around the angle of the balcony. A bullet hit the railing with a splintering sound. He loosed another shot, and then another. Jap Riker came out of his running crouch, stumbled, came on, throwing lead wildly, as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his gun and let it fall.

Flame made darting spears as it snapped from Sonora's pistol, and again Jap Riker straightened. He swayed, a dull sound was drawn from his throat and he slammed against the rail of the balcony, teetered there, toppled over. His body made a flat, soggy sound as it crashed to the tiles in the lower patio. Riker didn't

move. His body was a lifeless, crumpled heap.

Pablo, a quaver in his voice, was standing at the bottom of the stairs, calling out in Spanish to know who it was, and what it was all about.

"Stay down there an' watch your gate!" Sonora roared. He ran toward Teresa, grabbed her wrist. Her flow of screams damned abruptly.

"You an' Reulin an' Gitano Valdez figgered me as lookin' out for Korse's side down here," he snarled. "Korse warned you against me—but you'd framed 'er from last night: to make' er look like I was killed tryin' to run off with you. That way, if you was wrong, you'd still be right with Korse.

"Bigod, you listen here. You messed things up. So you just blab 'er how this was done!" He was jeering her hotly.

"You let Riker in your outside window, likely," he spat. "Well, she looks like you're goin' to do some different lyin' than you'd figgered on. Or do you want to mess things up more? Riker was after you, an' I got him. Or do you want to tell the truth?"

She jerked away from him.

"You haven't won yet—whoever you are for," she snarled murderously.

Lois was calling from below. Toro came running into the patio and almost stumbled over Riker's body. Outside the walls, Wark Reulin was yelling for Pablo to let him in.

Sonora wheeled, ran back, yanked on his boots and got his .45, then ran down to join the rest. Teresa was finishing—"I screamed and ran out, and Riker followed me. Sonora shot him."

Wark Reulin came bolting in. He let go an explosive grunt, slapped his paws toward his guns, then caught himself. Sonora was eyeing Reulin in that greenish, heated way of his. Reulin straightened, turned toward Lois Valdez.

"Seems to me," he snarled, "there's somethin' too much funny goin' on around these parts. This Smith—"

"Will talk to me," Lois cut in. "Toro, have this body removed. Teresa, go back to your rooms. Sonora—"

She turned and walked to her own quarters, Sonora on her heels.

SHE moved to the center of the room, turned, faced him gravely, stolidly. "Well?" she said flatly. "It was hinted you came for Teresa. To get her away and into the hands of Myra Maffitt. I didn't want to believe. But now—Well, the evidence is against you. That Jap Riker wasn't after Teresa. If he had been, why was he coming toward you, instead of running away?"

"You heard the story," he grunted.

She lowered her fine head and he saw her shoulders, under the soft robe she had thrown over her nightdress, were shaking. He moved over and touched her gently. She did not draw away from him. She looked up, tears heavy on her long lashes.

"I had hoped I could trust you," she sobbed. "Teresa, Korse, Gitano Valdez and Myra Maffitt—all

of them are somehow mixed into something. Korse—of him I was not so sure. I know he wants me to get the Maffitt part of Valdez Grant; and hopes to marry me."

"It was Korse warned you, wasn't it?" Sonora said.

"Yes."

Sonora frowned heavily. He put fingers beneath her chin and tilted her head, looking down into her eyes. "Lois, I was sent here," he said. "not trustin' anyone, either. Not even you. But now, I got to trust you; an' you me."

"I can't. I wish I could," she choked.

"Listen. Korse isn't tryin' to get Myra Maffitt to sell out to you. He's played up to her, an' advised her not to sell. He's tryin' to use her, an' she's tryin' to use him. I figger you ain't wound up in this. Lois, how about—guns?"

"Guns?" She blinked at him, shaking her head.

"Yes, guns. Are your cattle really bein' run off? Your horses rustled? Or do you know they're bein' run across the line an' swapped for guns an' ammunition that'll start a mess of trouble down here?"

"No!" she cried. "That can't, mustn't be. The name of Valdez, Sonora. I am proud of it. I love it here; I love my people, my Government—even as I love the United States. That's why I want all of the Grant held in peace and to be again the great thing it once was."'

She faced him squarely. "Why do you say such things?" she demanded. "Are you trying to—*Dios!* What are you trying to do?"

"I can't tell you now. But—you got to trust me."

"I can't trust anyone. How do I know you speak true of Korse?"

"Have you ever tried to see Myra Maffitt?" he asked.

"I would have ridden to see her. Korse advised against it."

"He don't want you women gettin' together," Sonora said. His fingers made tapping sounds on his low-slung holster. "I—"

"*Senorita* Valdez."

Toro Frias called in to her. "There is the laughing breaker of horses at the gate. He weeshes to see *Senor* Smith. A matter of a loose bunch of horses he has found and wishes to round up."

"Give me a li'l time!" Sonora begged Lois. He laid his hands on her shoulders.

"What difference," she moaned. "I have given you more than that, Sonora."

He frowned and shook his head.

"Even though I cannot trust you," she whispered, pushing him toward the door, "I have, I think, given you my heart."

AN odd sort of joy, all messed up with worry, coursed through Sonora as he went outside. Riente Rivera stepped out of deep shadow by the wall, motioned to him and led the way.

He stopped a couple of hundred yards from the walls, looked carefully around, lowered his voice.

"Sonora, I have just come from Pepita. Earlier this day, that *ladrone*, Gitano, call on her. He is drunk, and she holds out to him a promise of herself—when he is big man as he brag to be. He tell her many guns, much ammunition,

The quirt swished down, cutting with a sickening sound into the girl's struggling form.

come across tomorrow night. Those Korse, naturally, handles it the other side of the line.

"Here, Gitano handles it. I learn already much is stored in a cave below Gitano's poor *hacienda*.

"Not yet have they let the 'breeds, the Yaquis, the *peons know,* for fear of a slip. But once those gun are delivered. . . ."

"That's your job," Sonora said, a rising note in his voice. "Soldiers—"

"I have a few men in the hills. We cannot call a company, Sonora It would cause unrest, stir up things. We must do this quietly, without fuss. *Sabe?* The night—tomorrow—your Border men stop the guns, the ammunition at the Line. Here, I seize that cache. Korse and Gitano, no doubt, will be with the shipment."

"There's Reulin," Sonora reminded.

Rivera sighed. "We take things as they come," he said. "Me, I'm sure Lois Valdez mean right. It would be a shame if too much trouble started, and an uneasy Government had to take Valdez Grant. Or the American Government confiscated above the Border."

"When things bust," Sonora muttered, "Myra Maffitt's goin' to be nabbed. I ain't carin' about her, so much. But she's goin' to kick up plenty dust, which ain't goin' to do Lois any good. But, if she wasn't a r o u n d, if she'd get sense—"

He snapped his fingers.

"I got to ride tonight, an' get word to Chief Howser anyhow," he blurted. "I think I'll just toss another loop around Ed Korse by bringin' Myra Maffitt back with me!"

"To what purpose, Sonora?"

"So she an' Lois can compare notes, an' see just how Korse's been puttin' the spurs to them. An' to keep her from bein' picked up an' causin' trouble an' talkin' when we want all this kept quiet."

Riente Rivera laughed. "Me, I wouldn't want those job. My Pepita, she is enough for me to handle. One buzzsaw is bad. Two—three, will chew a man all to pieces."

He moved beside Sonora as they started toward the stables.

When they parted, R i v e r a warned, "Maybe I am needed some place else tomorrow night. It is up to you here." He looked upward at an early-fading moon; a moon now yellowing to a reddish hue.

"There is blood on the moon, Sonora. Tomorrow night, I think, the moon she take a bath in it."

"I'll try to fill the tub for it," Sonora promised as he turned Cactus's head for the Border and Goodbye.

CHAPTER IX

Return of the Dead

A MAN in puncher's garb rode out of the chaparral in answer to Sonora's low whistle. They talked in low tones. "No need to mess up goin' after her. Tell Howser he's got to nail them before they hit the line, an' things'll be took care of down below. Rivera's doin' his part there."

They parted. Sonora rode on through the hills, circled Goodbye, now a night-mantled, sleeping piece of pestilence, and gained the knoll on which the Maffitt *casa* stood.

He removed his spurs and hung them on the saddlehorn and went forward, knocked softly on the gate in the wall and called, "Scar. This's Sonora Smith."

The bar rasped and Sonora stepped through. Myra's guard stepped back and motioned. Sonora went by him. Some sixth sense caused him to sway aside as Scar quickly shifted his feet. The man's right arm had risen, now fell. The slashing gunbarrel touched Sonora's right ear as he ducked and the blow on his shoulder shot deadening, throbbing pain along his collarbone.

He spun, flailing backhanded with his left, catching the other across the mouth. The man croaked, snarled a low curse, came on balance again, starting to lift the pistol in his hand. Sonora kicked and Scar groaned as he went to his knee. Sonora kicked again. The gun thudded to the ground.

Sonora was on him as he tried to get up, reaching, getting the man's throat between his fingers, thrusting him back down, keeping him off balance so he couldn't get leverage to force to his feet.

He flung backward, heaving Sonora headlong above him and breaking free. Sonora rolled, turned as he came to his knees, and his right hand smacked against his holster as he lunged on up. Scar was coming up, in possession of the gun he'd dropped. Sonora lunged, his own gunbarrel slashed downward and he felt the shock of contact run up to his elbow.

The man made no sound as he flattened on his stomach, his arms outstretched. Blood seeped from his scalp and smeared his face.

"I reckon," Sonora panted, "I hit too hard."

HE DRAGGED Scar back into a clump of flowering shrubs and left him, going on toward the house. He couldn't savvy the man making no sound. Why had he wanted to get Sonora the silent way, when a yell would have brought him help?

And why had Myra given orders to have Sonora busted? Sonora's lips tightened. He aimed to find that out.

Doors were latched. He worked around to Myra's windows. The heavy Spanish shutters were closed on all but one, and there, the window was propped open. He knew how the bed was placed. Myra would have her head close to the window. He could hear, now, her slow, steady breathing as he crouched outside.

He raised, placed his hands on the bottom of the window, a bit above his shoulders, tensed, sprang upward and flung his legs inside.

The figure on the bed jerked, rolled, started to cry out. Sonora flung himself across the bed and clamped his hand over Myra's mouth.

Bare, flailing legs and arms, shoulders, tumbled bedclothes; Myra and Sonora were a sudden, struggling pinwheel. She fought with nails, teeth worrying at the palm that kept back her cries.

"Stop it!" he hissed.

He felt her stiffen, tremble, then go limp. Cautiously, he took his hand from her mouth.

"Sonora," she wheezed. "But—you're dead!"

"Dead? What do you mean?"

"Close the shutter and light the lamp," she choked. "Where is Scar?"

HE PULLED the shutter closed, fished for a match. "Scar done what you ordered him—or he tried to," Sonora yanked out. "I buffaloed him, an' too hard, I reckon. He's layin' outside."

The light of the lamp was dull in the room. It revealed Myra, gown torn nearly off, sitting up in the tumbled bed.

"I didn't order him to get you," Myra avowed. "Sonora, Korse told me you had sold me out; that you had gone over to Lois, and our chance to get control would be gone if we didn't work fast. He said Gitano and Reulin had killed you."

"Korse didn't know it, but a skunk named Riker tried to get me for Reulin an' Gitano Valdez tonight. Korse's crossin' you, Myra. An' in turn, Reulin, Teresa an' Gitano'll jump him when they've done with him on this end. I got an idea you wouldn't fare so well. Scar'd tote you off, likely—seein' he must've been in with Korse more than he was for you.

"It looks like Scar had his orders not to let me get to you if I wasn't killed down below."

Myra shivered, tried ineffectually to draw the tatters of the gown about her. "Korse!" she sobbed. "If there was some way I could fix that dirty son!"

"Maybe you can," Sonora told her. "Listen. Those guns here in this house? The stuff that goes down tomorrow night?"

"How did you know—?"

"Never mind. Answer me."

"The stuff is here on the grounds somewhere. I don't know just where. But it wasn't to be run below for a week yet."

"Korse is lyin'. Anyhow, we don't want to get it on this side of the grant. No law against havin' guns an' ammunition around. But when they're caught luggin' 'er across the line!"

"You—you're working for the Border Patrol!" she blasted.

"Not officially. Just—well, helpin' out. Like I've helped the Department of Interior, an' others in my time since you knew me," he corrected her.

"I'll tell Korse. No matter how he figures on crossing me—"

"You won't tell him," Sonora stated flatly. "You won't stay here, either, so they'll have to pick you up, an' then maybe start excitement between nations and wild Indians an' fool *peons,* an' scum gringoes over here. Nope. You're goin' where somebody can talk sense to you an' where you'll be out of the way."

"I am, am I? And where do you think that will be?"

"To Hacienda Valdez, with Lois. That's where, exact."

She lunged off the bed and he grabbed her, again clamping his hand over her mouth. She writhed wildly, almost losing what remained of her torn, scant attire. Suddenly her struggles ceased and she slid her arms around his neck, pressed herself hard against him, her body warm and still quivering from her struggles.

"It ain't no use," he told her. "I'm doin' this for your own good, as well as lots of others. Nothin' you do is goin' to euchre me out of it."

Her eyes roved wildly, then her gaze was concentrated on his face. Her shoulders slumped a little and she nodded. He took his hand from

Myra was fighting with Teresa, who slashed at her with the quirt.

her mouth.

"*'Sta bueno,* Sonora. I'm licked. I'm a fool, I guess. I had ideas out of my line. And ideas about you, too—even if I was trying to use you. I lose. I hope this Lois wins. After all, she's a woman, and so am I. I can be a sport, Sonora, even if it hurts. Kiss me, just once, you rat, and then I'll yank on some rags and we'll get out of here. Cross me, huh? Give me a cigarette, Sonora. I'll see this through with you. And then it's me for the old life again. . . ."

He kissed her, rolled and lighted her a cigarette, trying to be calm and avoid watching her as she got into her clothes. Tamed, this woman would be a joy for a man who knew how to handle her. He didn't figure he was or could be that man.

In silence, they went out through a small rear gate in the wall and to the stable, where Sonora saddled her a horse. They hit the trail as coming morning spread a dead, gray light in the east.

In the patio back there, Scar made faint sounds, stirred, was still again. After a while, he moved once more, rolled over. Sonora's blow had not been entirely solid, and Scar's skull was thick. . . .

CHAPTER X

Both Ends Against the Middle

WITH the big *casa,* the scattered buildings around it in sight, Sonora loosened his gun in the holster and gave Myra a meaning look. She nodded and ducked her head deep into the collar of the slicker Sonora had loaned her.

As they dismounted, Sonora's eyes roved the place. There was no sign of Wark Reulin. A figure near the cantina turned toward him, laughing. Sonora nodded, grinning in return, and Riente Rivera strolled toward the stables.

Big Toro Frias opened the gate for them and Sonora hurried Myra through the yard into the inner patio. Lois was not out here. They turned toward her quarters. Upstairs, Teresa's hard, grim eyes stared down at them. The girl gave a start when she saw Myra with Sonora and turned hurriedly away from her door, to grab paper and pencil and scribble feverishly.

She leaned from the outside window, then. A *peon* made lazy pretense of working in the flowers below. Teresa's breath hissed down at him and he straightened.

"*Senor* Reulin," she said softly, tossing down the note she had written. The man pocketed it and moved away.

In Lois Valdez' living room, Myra and Lois stood and faced each other, parrying glances. It was an awkward moment, and Sonora said, "You've met before, I take it."

"A few times," Lois answered. "But not here. And I don't understand—"

"Myra," Sonora told her, "wants to pull out. She's willin' to sell to you, Lois."

"I have no money now." She was wary, expecting a trick.

"You're an American citizen, yet, in a way, under the protection of Mexico," Sonora said. "Which makes that end of the deal all *bueno.* I think, before many more hours, you'll have help. Mexico don't want trouble here now; they're havin' too much somewheres else. They want this grant held proper an' peaceful, an' likely'll help the right person to keep 'er so."

Lois frowned. "How do you know so much?" she demanded.

"You'll find out—later," he hedged. "Thing is, Myra is willin' to ride side with you. She'll tell you how Ed Korse has been playin' both sides against the middle, an' you can tell her some of the same right back."

He moved toward the door, then stopped. "Myra, you'd best stay

out of sight the rest of the day. Nobody who knew you saw you come in. We don't want 'er out that you're here."

OUTSIDE, he moved toward the cantina, then to the stables. Rivera waited for him there.

"Things move, I think." Rivera grinned. "A few moments ago, Wark Reulin ride away. South, toward Gitano Valdez' place. Pretty soon, now, I ride, to meet the few men who await me in the hills."

"You figger a few'll be plenty?"

"*Si.* So far, there are only a few into this. The arming of a large number would come after tonight—*if* the guns were brought across. I wait until dark, take the guns and ammunition in the cave, and take the Valdez men who are there. Then we move toward here, so if any get away at the Border, we catch them. There will be no trouble, I think. Korse, Gitano, the others will no doubt be taken at the Line. You will return here, meeting me."

Sonora nodded. Rivera chuckled. "You bring *Senora* Maffitt, eh?"

"Uh-huh. She sees things right, an' she's sore as a saddle boil, an' ready to let go the mess Fate Maffitt left her. . . . Wonder who kilt Maffitt, anyhow?"

"Makes no difference," Rivera decided. He yawned. "We will have one, two drinks, and then I go. It is funny. Peoples think trouble here calls for armies, uprising. Yet we save the Valdez Grant on both sides the line, we stop a small revolution, rustling, running of contraband—and but few will ever know."

"An' then I reckon you'll leave your Pepita with a busted heart," Sonora drawled as they went in to the bar.

"No. Those Pepita, I think she have me." He looked slyly at Sonora and raised his glass. "An' you, I think, have a nice choice, eh?"

"Aw, you go to the devil," Sonora growled.

TOWARD mid-afternoon, he returned to Lois and Myra. They had relaxed toward each other now. He had a glass of wine with them, and the way they eyed him made him uncomfortable. Myra looked at him in a vaguely hopeful manner; Lois, shyly, uncertainly, and with a little jealousy.

Sonora set down his glass and was glad it was time for him to leave.

"I'll be ridin' toward the Line," he allowed. "To see how things come off. I'll be back sometime tonight."

Myra rose impulsively. "Take care of yourself, cowboy," she begged. She swayed toward him, then bit her lips and looked at Lois. A good sport—now. "You might have somebody waiting for you when you get back."

Sonora gulped. Lois sat still, her head bent. She didn't say no. Sonora was thinking of her when he rode away. Of the night in her rooms; could hear her saying she had given him her heart. Fire surged in his veins when he conjured a vision of her in the skirt and Spanish shawl she had worn that night . . . .

The sun eased down, then seemed to burn the string that held it and

plummet behind the broken peaks and ridges. Sudden twilight came. He followed a dim trail along a little bench covered with stunted growth.

On the side of the hill opposite him, two men hunkered in the brush. They looked at each other, mouths tight lines.

Scar, a bandage causing his hat to sit at a high angle on his head, pushed words between his teeth. "I told you. He's brought her down here. They're crossin' you up, Ed. Bigod, they are!"

"Yeah? Well, let Gitano run his men tonight. There'll be no guns come across until he shows me where he stands. They don't dare bother me until they get enough stuff across."

"An' Myra Maffitt?"

"We'll take a little trip down, and call on her and Lois. It might be," Korse grinned maliciously, "Myra can disappear, and Lois made to listen to reason."

"An' Sonora Smith?"

"You got the answer in your hands. Don't miss."

It was a long shot, and the fading light and shifting shadows made shooting bad. Scar took careful aim, his bead on the back of Sonora, riding over there two hundred or more yards away. The twilight quietude of the hills was shattered, smashed by the rifle shot, the echoes of it.

They saw Sonora fling his hands wide and fall. He rolled, fell half behind a boulder as Cactus ran on up the trail. Sonora didn't move.

Ed Korse and Scar walked back into a little gully, got their horses from where they'd hidden them when they'd heard Sonora's approach, rode on.

"That was even better than when I got Fate Maffitt," Korse rejoiced. "Maybe, now, Myra will listen to reason. First, her old man; now, her double-crossing, sneaking friend. Let's go."

Sonora, over there, lay very still. But his eyes were open, his jaw clamped until the muscles stood out in ridges as he watched Korse and Scar ride on toward *Hacienda* Valdez. When they were out of sight, Sonora got to his feet and whistled softly. While he waited for Cactus to come back to him, he fingered the bullet tear in the left shoulder of his jumper.

His forehead furrowed, and he was suddenly cussing himself. Trying to keep things smooth, protect Myra—and thereby, Lois—he reckoned he'd messed things up. But for Scar, his taking Myra away would not have jammed the deal. He'd thought Scar dead.

"They ain't but one answer," he snarled aloud. Cactus came back, and Sonora hit the saddle and whammed for the Border. Men came out of the darkness when he gave the signal there.

A TALL, gray-haired man, Chief Howser, cursed when he'd heard Sonora out. "If Korse is down there, Sonora, it means no guns will come across tonight. There's nothing we can do but wait—"

"Wait, nothin'. No tellin' what'll happen if we do. This last shipment is hid somewhere on the Maffit place. It won't be no trouble to squeeze the whereabouts out of somebody there."

"We have no right—"

"Myra Maffitt, or Lois Valdez, will see to it there's nothin' said. Get that stuff. You can keep 'er quiet you got it on the Maffitt spread. On the other end, tonight, Rivera's goin' to grab what's been run across before."

Howser nodded. "If this is cleaned up right, it's going to save us a lot of men and trouble along this stretch. But you, Sonora. How about you? Remember, we can't back you down there."

"This will!" Sonora growled. He was patting his six-gun as he turned and rode back into Mexico.

CHAPTER XI

Cards on the Table

A FAINT moon outlined the silent buildings. Sonora left Cactus and went to the gate. He tapped softly, waited, and when he received no answer, called under his breath, "Toro."

The bar raised softly. Startled, Sonora stared at Teresa. She put her fingers to her lips and pointed downward. Old Toro Frias lay there, dead eyes wide open, the hilt of a knife marking the drive of a heavy blade into his heart.

"I watched them. Scar and Korse," Teresa whispered. "I hid. They are with Lois and Myra. I don't know what they're doing. I'm afraid."

"Why didn't you call in some of the workers—?" he began.

"They would do nothing. Better some other way."

He could not see the hardness of her eyes, the curl of her lips. He had no time to fool away.

"Stay out of the way," he warned her in a whisper.

She dropped back into deep shadows as he went toward Lois's door. There she waited, a little impatiently, listening.

No sounds issued from Lois' long living room. Heavy inside shutters, the thick door, the thick 'dobe walls would make it almost impossible for anyone to be heard. That very silence was ominous.

Gun in hand, Sonora put his left hand to the door and gave a sudden shove. The heavy panel swung and he leaped inside.

Lois and Myra, fear lining their faces, yet with their lips compressed defiantly, huddled together on a couch. Scar, behind them, held a shot-loaded quirt in one hand, the butt reversed. Ed Korse, one hand outflung, was pointing to a little table on which lay papers, pen, ink.

They froze like this, staring at Sonora with mouths agape and eyes rolling. It was Scar who, on a bursting breath swore, "Bigod, he ain't dead!"

"Sonora," they said— Lois sobbed.

"Cowboy, you're a sight for sore eyes," Myra managed dryly. "These tramps moved in on us. They're trying to get the papers on the old homestead."

"An' the hero pulls up in time," Sonora agreed, no mirth in his voice. "Scar, drop that quirt an' ease up them hands. You, Korse, claw a cloud or two. Now, huddem your souls! An'—"

"And now we are all here, it is best you, also, *Senor* Smith, join them in the clawing of clouds," a mocking voice jeered.

SONORA saw Korse stiffen, tremble. He turned his head. A fancy pistol in each hand, Gitano Valdez lounged in the doorway behind him. His own hardware in his paws, Wark Reulin was at Gitano's shoulder. These two were devils. But even more so was Teresa, who stood behind these two.

Sonora's breath sucked in sharply. Gitano cocked one gun, the metallic click running up Sonora's spine. His .45 thumped to the floor.

"You will move over and sit down, in that chair facing us," Gitano ordered. Stiffly, praying to the skies they would not search him and find the only card he had left—his shoulder gun—Sonora obeyed.

GITANO moved in with Reulin, Teresa following. She closed the door and dropped the bar. It was Korse who snarled, "Reulin, you double-crossing—"

"What is one double-cross among so many of the marks of the same?" Gitano said pleasantly, mockingly. "This morning, this Smith brings Myra here. She would get together with Lois, eh? I suspect you learn of it. You would, I guess—what you call?—gobble all the gravy. No, no, my tricky one.

"I have guess you do not send across the guns tonight. You might have, what you say, got me in the hot water at the Border. So I don't go to the Border. When I learn Myra and Lois together, it is *bueno*. Together, all of us make deal. I am surprised, and very happy to find here *all* of you. Makes it easier."

"What you think you're going to do?" Korse spat. "You can't get the guns and stuff you need without me. You don't know where this last shipment is hidden."

"True. But Myra, she will tell. Perhaps I can persuade her, even, to turn her place to me."

"Just try!" Myra snarled.

"Myra don't know where the guns are," Korse grunted.

"But the Border Patrol will find—" Myra shut her mouth. Too late. The slip was made.

Korse, Gitano wheeled toward Sonora. "Bigod, *that's* where you come in, is it?" Korse barked. "A lousy border-wheeler—"

"They can't do a thing to us down here," Reulin snorted. "They never got us runnin' no arms."

Korse was eyeing Gitano closely. "Gitano, we've played our hands wrong," he suddenly offered. "Listen. You need someone the other side of the line. All right. The Border men will find that stuff on the place up there. If Myra don't show up again, they'll take it she was tipped off and beat it."

"I'm listening."

"All right. She was aiming to sell out to Lois. Let her make out the papers. That'll look like collusion between the two women. Then, Lois gets frightened. She signs over the place to you and Teresa. In turn, you, later, will give a bill of sale to me, for the part of the grant above the line. We can lie quiet awhile, and go on with things. We need each other and you know it!"

GITANO nodded. He could use Korse, all right. Later, when he was done with him . . . One could almost read his thoughts.

Sonora said, "Gitano aimed for me: she got in the way."

And Korse's thoughts ran in the same groove.

"What about the women?" Reulin put in.

"There are places where women can disappear," Korse said, licking his lips. "Maybe, after a spell, Lois will be *glad* to marry me; or glad to die."

"I'll take care of Myra," Reulin croaked. He saw Scar open his mouth to protest, and added, "Scar and me."

"And I," Gitano said, "will be with my dear, distant relative, Teresa. They would cheat us of our rights, eh, Teresa?"

"Teresa—" Lois choked.

"Don't you beg to me. You tried to be a guardian, take things for yourself all along. Now, you—you—" She choked on the bone of her own triumphant wrath.

"All I ask is that this hombre, Sonora, be left to me," Scar snarled. "He'll wish he'd never busted me on the head."

"That pleasure is yours. After we finish here," Gitano agreed. "And now, we go ahead. Myra, sit down there. You sign your place to Lois. She, in turn—"

"You dirty spig, I'll see you roast first," Myra snarled.

Gitano lunged, grabbed her by the throat and yanked her to her feet. "No use to scream," he ground out. "I have men guarding outside. Nobody will help you." He shook her, raised one clenched fist.

Sonora started out of his chair. Scar grabbed up the quirt. The shot-loaded butt thudded on Sonora's skull. Bursting lights exploded before his eyes as he sat back, head slumped, arms dangling. He was conscious of Scar cursing, jeering about "a part payment in his own medicine", yet he could not move.

"That's an idea." Teresa's voice was eager, sickening. "Scar, hold my darling relative, Lois. Gitano, Reulin, Korse. Grab the hussy's arms and legs and hold her on the floor. A man sometimes gets faint-hearted where a woman is concerned. I won't. Hand me that quirt."

SONORA clenched his teeth, sweat commencing to pour off of him. His head still spun and his knees were weak. He had to wait; be positive he had some small chance before he made his move. He tried to close his eyes, and couldn't. Under lowered lids, he

watched, fighting to gather strength and bide his time.

Korse was kneeling on Myra's feet; Reulin and Gitano held her arms pinned to the floor. The heavy quirt in hand, a mad look on her face, Teresa stooped, caught the back of Myra's dress, tore it from top to hem. Thin underthings offered no protection to Myra's back.

"Now!" Teresa croaked. The quirt swished down, cutting with a sickening sound. Myra sobbed, clenched her teeth. Lois started screaming.

"Stop it!" Scar bawled. He slammed her back on the couch.

"Tie her up while we work on this one," Reulin snapped.

Lois rolled to the floor. Scar lifted her bodily and hurled her back onto the couch her waist ripping half off. He pawed for the tops of her stockings and peeled one off. She continued to fight while he kneeled brutally on her arms, tying her wrists together with the length of hosiery.

Slowly, Sonora was gathering strength. He planted his feet firmly on the floor. The swish, the sickening cut of the quirt ceased.

"Roll her on her back," Teresa, a mad, vicious tigress, shrilled. "A few good cuts on her belly with this quirt should change her mind. If that don't work, we can hold her mouth open and give her the Yaqui water cure."

It made Sonora's insides ache to think of that. To have one's mouth held open, nostrils pinched closed, while water was poured into her until her stomach distended and she drowned, terribly, hideously within herself.

Myra moaned faintly as they rolled her onto her back. The quirt cut through silk, left a great, angry welt on her shrinking white body...

Sonora sucked in a great breath. Hate, a raging fury charged through him at sight of their bestial faces. Still kneeling by Lois's body, Scar looked up as Sonora's right hand streaked for his shoulder gun.

"Sonora!" he bawled, hurling himself aside.

Sonora's gun throbbed inside the room.

The hell that broke was too hot to be described.

CHAPTER XII

Peace on Valdez Grant

SPRAWLING, Scar pawed for the gun he dropped when Sonora's slug slapped into him. Lois rolled, kicked him off balance as he scooped it up. Korse had leaped back, his arms crossing in a flashing draw. Reulin had his guns in the clear and was on his feet. Sonora kicked his chair at Korse and the .38 barked again, echoed by a groan breaking past Reulin's lips.

Korse spurted erect and staggered into Gitano. They crashed against the wall.

Myra, rags of her clothes fluttering about her, was fighting Teresa, who slashed at her with the quirt, screaming insanely all the time. By the couch, Scar sat flat on the floor, blood pouring through parted lips, his eyes going dull.

Sonora tripped on a Navajo and went to his knees as Korse and Gitano regained their balance. Lead snapped above his head, beat the wall back of him as he sprawled,

his face turned toward Korse, smoke from his gunbarrel thrusting upward. Gitano fired again, cursed, flung one pistol from him and jerked a heavy throwing knife from his sash. With that he would not miss.

A slug burned Sonora's back as he rolled, and Wark Reulin, swaying, bracing himself with one hand against the wall, caught his answered fire, took a faltering step forward, crashed backward, sought to fight his way to his feet again.

"Gringo rat!" Gitano screamed. He flung the throwing knife—just as Myra Maffitt hurled herself into Teresa and sent her stumbling back. Back between Gitano and Sonora Smith.

There was a sickening, gruesome sound. Teresa clawed at her breast, tugged, and her voice rose, rose and broke as she went down.

Gitano plunged toward the door. In a moment of silence that was eerily strange, gunsound came faintly from outside.

"The lamp, Reulin!" Gitano bawled. He reached for the bar with one hand, flung a shot wide of Sonora with the gun in the other.

The hammer fell under Sonora's thumb. An empty cartridge clicked beneath the firing pin. He hurled the gun at Gitano just as Reulin, staggering, trying desperately to stay up, knocked down the lamp bracketed on the wall.

Sonora plunged blindly toward the doorway, trying to stop Gitano from opening the door. Once that door was opened, Gitano's men let in, there would be no hope for himself, the women, at all.

Air fanned the choking layers of powder smoke as Gitano pulled back the door. Sonora flung himself forward, missed as Gitano leaped outside, yelling, "*Hombres!* In there—"

Sonora was crawling on hands and knees, feeling for a gun. Wark Reulin swayed past, half fell outside.

"Lois! Myra!" Sonora croaked. "Stay down on the floor."

"Not if I can find a gun," Lois cried back at him.

Sonora stiffened there on his all-fours. His ears rang, mourned gun thunder now past. He coughed protest to the acrid bite of smoke and powder fumes in throat and nose.

A MOCKING laugh came from outside. And words.

"So sorry. Just now, we shoot one, two those you had here. And now, after awhile, *Senor* Gitano Valdez, I think you have the back against the wall."

"Rivera!" Sonora called.

"Sonora, *amigo?* It is you? *Dios,* what is this that goes on?"

Sonora's sigh was very audible. "You saddle-colored love-maker, come in an' see," he returned.

"That—that is Riente, the horse breaker," Lois's voice, weak, quivery, sounded in a dark corner of the room. "How—?"

Rivera was in the doorway, trying to pierce the darkness with his eyes.

"It is Riente Rivera, of the Government of Mexico, *Senorita mio,*" he enlightened her. "Working with one who serves his own country and us. One—"

A match flared, touched a candle's wick and dull light filled the room. Lois thrust the candle into a holder, hands trembling.

"Ahhhh!" Rivera exclaimed. And finished, "—one who is a wolf with curls, it would seem."

Lois turned her eyes from the shambles this room had become; tried to close her nostrils to the smell of violent death. Dragging her rags around her, wincing when they touched her tortured body, Myra came forward.

"I—I'm glad I don't get you, Sonora," she declared, trying to be light. "You're too much of a whirlwind. Give me a cigarette."

He gave her the smoke, held a match for her. Across the flame, she studied him. Then she jerked her head toward Lois, who had sunk down on the couch.

"There's one, though," Myra opined, "who'll settle the whirl for you for a little while. You ninny, go to her."

Sonora nodded, sat down, leaned the girl's head against his chest. He held her, watching Rivera as that one, his grin now frozen, inspected this slaughterhouse.

Teresa lay on her side, one hand still gripping the throwing knife that had driven the life from her. Death, a merciful thing, considering what life for one like her might have led her to, had wiped the vicious expression off her face.

"Gitano," Sonora answered Rivera's questioning glance. "He tossed that at me, an' she got in the way."

Rivera nodded. Moved on. Korse lay on his back, as he had fallen when Sonora's bullets, fired from the floor, drove into him. Scar was huddled beyond the end of the couch. Rivera sighed.

"You do too good job, Sonora, for them kind. I am ashamed. Almost too late. Tonight, we take the arms and the cave. We learn from one we capture, there is none going to the Border for guns tonight. So I hurry back. Outside, some fools try to stop us . . . ."

One of his men begged pardon to interrupt. "That *hombre,* Reulin, fast dies," he told Rivera.

"Bring him in. And the Valdez *cabron* with him."

They carried Wark Reulin in, and laid him down. He rolled his head and looked toward Myra. "I—I figured for you all along. I wanted you before Fate Maffitt got you."

"You killed Fate?" Myra intoned.

"Naw. That's what I want to say. Korse—had Scar do that. Figured to get you, the place up there, gobble up down here. That's why—I crossed him up—an' hooked in with—Gitano."

"Wark," Myra said gently. She choked back more words and turned away. Reulin would not hear her now. Dead men never hear.

SWEAT pouring off his face, Gitano, arms pinioned behind him, gulped, looked toward Rivera. "You have not enough evidence—" he began.

"Tonight, we have the arms you store in the cave. You get ready to make uprising, turn *mestizos, peons,* wild Yaquis loose with weapons, to plunder and kill. If that isn't enough—there." He pointed to the body of Teresa.

"That knife, I have seen it in your sash so many times."

He nodded at his men. Gitano's knees sagged. They dragged him out. Other men came. Teresa, the

others who had thrown themselves away in those blasting seconds, were taken away.

After that, then, came faint sound of a volley of rifle fire.

Rivera crossed himself, Myra dragged heavily on a cigarette, and Lois shuddered and clung to Sonora Smith.

Back to the wall . . . The firing squad . . . .

"Like those others, now," Rivera said heavily, "Gitano knows. The double-cross, it is not the cross on which to hold."

"If it's all the same," Myra said, "I'd like for somebody to ride me back to the Border. You, Rivera? Got a spare man?"

"Of a certainty."

"Well, I'll ride. Lois and I wouldn't squawk: but I had already signed the Maffitt works over to her. This afternoon. At whatever terms she can meet later on."

"Wait," Lois said, looking up. "Stay here tonight."

"Nope. I want this behind me. And," she sighed and looked at Sonora, "you'll have all the comfort you'll need."

She stopped in the doorway. Made painful business of squaring her cut, bruised shoulders. "Don't let this throw you, Lois. And the quicker you forget it, the better. Never wait for *mañana, senorita;* grab life while its tail is switching within your reach."

Rivera followed Myra's procedure. He, too, paused at the door.

"Here, for several days, will be much to be straightened out, Sonora. So you will stay, of course. I will see you—later."

"You leavin'?" Sonora frowned.

"For a while. I wish to forget this night. Pepita, she is one who *make* a man forget. *Buenas noches.*" He grinned, turned, left them there.

Sonora raised Lois to her feet. "Let's get out of this room," he said. "It's no place for you."

They went into the patio. Slowly, they climbed the stairs. Another part of this house would be better for them tonight.

They paused on the balcony. A mocking-bird flitted in a pepper tree and commenced to sing. Lois looked up at Sonora.

"Any place is a place for me, if my heart is there," she murmured.

He stooped, put his arm under her knees and lifted her in his arms. "Your dress is torn," he whispered, laying his lips to the soft hollow of her throat.

He felt her tremble, felt the rapid beating of her heart under the soft breast crushed against him. Her lips parted and her breath was warm against his cheek. She was repeating Myra's parting words: "Never wait for tomorrow—"

COMING SOON!

"DEVIL'S PUNCHBOWL"

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

DON'T MISS IT!

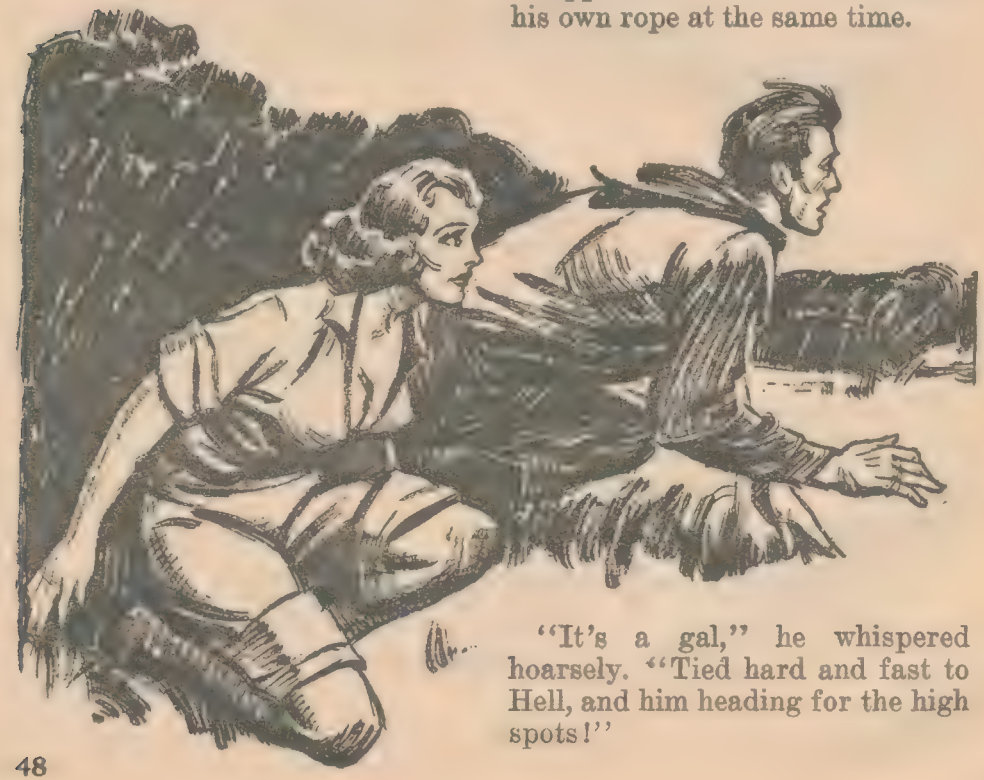
WANTED

STUD PRINGLE raised his tawny head from his nest of reeds on the margin of Tule Lake. Nostrils flared wide as he listened to the sounds in the swamp. Without effort he catalogued them as surely as though his keen blue eyes had seen what made them. Forgotten was the coiled muddy catch-rope in his left hand as a blue-gray stallion sucked his hoofs out of the mud and blazed a trail through the wild tule swamp.

"Some owl-hooter snared Blue Hell," he ground out savagely. "And me setting here in the water since sun-up!"

Two hundred yards away the brittle tule stalks were cracking like shots under the terrific drive of a fear-maddened stallion. "*Blue Hell,*" they called him in the wild Nevada Strip, and Stud Pringle caught his breath with a gasp when he saw the stallion's captor taking a mud ride on the seat of his levis. One end of the forty-foot lass-rope was held with both hands while the other end was looped fast around the buckaroo's middle.

"I hope he gets killed," Pringle muttered, but instantly his eyes widened as the roper's hat flew off. A mass of curly golden hair cascaded out for a moment before a shower of mud sloshed back like a dirty brown wave to engulf it. Stud Pringle forgot his anger and disappointment and remembered his own rope at the same time.



"It's a gal," he whispered hoarsely. "Tied hard and fast to Hell, and him heading for the high spots!"

Stud Pringle stalked the outlaw stallion, while the law stalked him. Oddly enough it was the stallion that brought the two stalkers together, then left them to the hands of fate. In the end, Stud was still "wanted"—but it was different this time!

By Jean Beaumont

THE blue-gray stallion was screaming shrilly with each suck of pounding hoofs as he plunged through the knee-deep mud and headed for the dry rim of the swamp. The girl on the other end of the rope was holding fast with both gloved hands while her high-heeled boots ploughed muddy furrows, making ineffectual brakes. She sledded through the muck like the cracker on the end of a bull-whip, with a thousand pounds of wild horse caught in her loop.

The big horse was rearing high, sledge-hammer hoofs poised over the fallen man.

Stud Pringle crouched in his hide-away and watched, fascinated like a spectator at a bull-fight, waiting for the kill. The girl wouldn't have a chance if the stallion got out of the swamp and gained dry ground! Blue Hell had known the touch of a rope twice

before, and each time he had killed the horse-trapper who had lassed him. As though sensing victory, the big horse veered sharply and made for the margin.

Stud Pringle cursed softly when the rope went slack to catch the plucky girl off guard. She was almost buried under the slime when the stallion lunged again to take up the slack at a right angle that pitched her head-forward, and big Stud Pringle knew that he was going to get his chance. Knew that he would get only one throw at the savage killer, but, in the Nevada badlands, man and beast considered one chance a break.

The blue stud was plunging for his hiding place with tremendous leaps that splattered the mud like inky rain-drops. The lean roper straightened suddenly with his right hand whipping out to send the finicky loop circling over laid-back ears. Stud Pringle was up to his knees in the mire with the rope tied around his lean waist, and he sat down at just the right time when the slack ran out to tauten the manila hemp.

A hundred and seventy pounds of rock-hard muscle straining against gripping heels just as Blue Hell was making a lunge, and the big stallion did a hoolihan and turned end over end with head buried under a foot of mud. Stud Pringle was after him like a swamp cat, fighting desperately for enough rope to make a running half-hitch. The slimy coil ran true to tangle both hind legs just before the stallion rolled over.

The hazy murk of twilight was thickening while the lean buckaroo worked his horse magic on the margin of Tule Lake. Only ten feet of slimy rope separated him from the kicking heels of his captive as Stud threw himself down and tied up the beast's legs with a braided piggin' string. Great yellow teeth snapped at him and missed by inches, and when he finally stepped away a pace and fumbled with the tight knot around his hips, Stud Pringle was trembling with exhaustion.

His fingers touched another rope before he thought of the girl, and then the breath jerked from his lungs when he went hand over hand down the twine and pulled a mud ball clear. He swore softly when he saw the slip-knot around her shapely waist, and a moment later he was carrying her to a shallow pool of clear water.

"Dead," he muttered softly. "She couldn't be alive after all that!"

His blue eyes widened when he put her down in the pool and washed the mud from her overalls and heavy wool shirt. As the black muck slowly dissolved, pale skin gleamed through the rents of the girl's clothing. The tall buckaroo tried to close his eyes as he loosened the soggy shirt and laid his head against her chest to listen for a heart heat.

His ear caught a faint murmur, but for a moment he wondered whether it wasn't his own heartbeat. But no! It couldn't be! His heart was racing. This was a soft regular throb. "It's beating," he almost shouted. "Her heart is beating!"

Stud Pringle was, by nature a practical man with no prudish inhibitions. He did what *had* to be

done. The Nevada Strip was a hundred miles from the nearest railroad, and even the most hardened citizens of the badlands took what precautions they could against exposure. In a way he was thankful for the deepening twilight as he pulled the muddy clothing from the girl's shapely figure and washed the sticky mud off her bruised flesh.

He shivered in the chill night air when he took off his heavy mackinaw and wrapped it around her. Then he picked her up and carried her over to his camp in a clump of cottonwoods and willows. There he wrapped her in his blankets before he set about building a blazing fire.

When the fire was going well, he fumbled in his saddle-bags and brought out a flask of whiskey. His whole being tingled as he held her against him and poured a few drops of the raw liquor between her parted lips. The girl coughed weakly but did not open her eyes. Stud Pringle let her down gently again and added his saddle-blanket to her covering.

HE WAS taking the blackened coffee pot from the fire when he heard a whisper behind him. The girl was sitting up when he turned to face her. She was staring at him with frightened brown eyes that were misty with tears.

"Where am I?" she whispered. "Who are you?"

"I'm Stud Pringle," he answered hoarsely. "Yo're at my camp on the north edge of Tule Lake!"

"Stud Pringle?" the girl echoed. "Oh!"

The lean buckaroo jerked his head around while the girl drew his coat tighter around her. "So you know Stud Pringle," he muttered, harshly. "You mind telling me who you are?"

He turned his head again as the girl flushed and bit her lip. She seemed lost in the voluminous folds of the coat about her. Stud stared into the fire and waited for her to speak. Then as he poured steaming cowboy coffee into tin cups and turned to hand her one, the breath jerked from his lungs. His own blue sixgun was in her right hand.

"I'll shoot, outlaw," the girl warned softly. "You'll know why when I tell you that my name is . . . Jess Sorday!"

Stud Pringle leaned back on his heels, and his jaw dropped as he stared at her pretty face. "Now ain't that somethin'," he grunted. "Jess Sorday is sheriff of Winnemucca County. Always figgered he was a man!"

"He is a man," the girl answered quietly. "My right name is Jessica, but everybody calls me Jess. Sorry, cowboy, but you're under arrest!"

Stud Pringle stared for a long moment and shook his tawny head. "Nuh uh," he contradicted. "You wouldn't cut a rusty like that on a man who saved yore life. You wouldn't stick him up with his own gun when he took off his own coat to keep you from dying of cold!"

"Sit still," the girl warned sternly. "I found your gun in that inside pocket where you had it hid. I'm a deputy under dad, and right now he's looking for you."

Stud Pringle remembered the steaming cup in his hand and placed it on the ground. Then he reached for his own cup and sipped slowly while his eyes studied the girl. He reached for the makings and smiled when the girl jabbed with the heavy forty-five, and he jerked his head toward the hog-tied stallion when an angry scream came from the swamp.

"You won't shoot," he said dryly. "But I'd like to know how come you to tie on to Blue Hell."

"We knew you'd head for here when dad shot your horse two days ago," the girl answered without hesitation. "The sheriff is coming along from the other end, and my horse broke his leg yesterday when he stepped into a dog hole."

"Mebbe you was going to ride Blue," the prisoner grunted, and his face changed as he leaned forward. "I'm going to give it to you straight," he began in a vibrating whisper. "That stud used to belong to me, and I'm the only man who can ride him. He would have killed you out there if I hadn't caught him in my loop!"

The girl shuddered and tightened her grip on the sixgun. "I'm thanking you, Stud Pringle," she answered warmly, and then trapped her full lips together. "But I took an oath to do my duty, and I'm holding you here until dad comes!"

"You might change yore mind after I talk my side of the story," the cowboy answered low in his throat. "Yore old man wants me for killing Buck Cawthorn. We was both working on the Diamond A like you know, and he tried to ride Blue Hell. He made out to kill the stud when he got throwed, and right then I caught him under my sights, and gave him a chance for a shoot-out. Just now I was laying out there in the tules waiting to get my catch-rope on Blue, but you beat me to it!"

The girl nodded and raised the hammer of the gun. "You killed a man," she sighed. "You are wanted for murder."

"He was dragging you through the mud, and you was being buried," the cowboy answered musingly. "And after this, mebbe you will know better than to fasten the rope around yore hips with a slip-knot. That rope all but cut you in two!"

The girl stared at him while the angry color surged to her face and burned her cheeks. Then comprehension flooded her eyes. "Oh!" she gasped. "You! You took off my clothes!"

Stud Pringle nodded his tawny head. "I got one change there in my slicker-pack," he grunted carelessly. "You better get into them before you catch yore death of dampness!"

"I hope they hang you," the girl whispered with an edge in her throaty voice. "For doing what you did!"

The lean cowboy shrugged. "Self defense," he muttered. "Cawthorn would have killed me if I hadn't got him first."

"That wasn't what I meant," the girl snapped.

STUD stretched his arms and yawned. "Yo're all the same another cowboy to me," he lied,

His own gun was in her hand. "I'll shoot, outlaw," the girl warned softly.

say he ain't dead?" he whispered, and then his lip curled. "I hate a liar," he sneered. "And you said I was wanted for murder!"

The girl edged back and bit her lip. "It's probably murder by now," she barked at Stud. "I'd rather have died than have you do what you did!"

carelessly. "You was soaking wet and covered with mud, and a hand catches pneumonia mighty easy up here in the Strip."

"You took off my clothing, I'm not forgetting that," the girl whispered hotly. "I hope Buck Cawthorn dies so they will hang you!"

Stud Pringle jerked up his head and narrowed his blue eyes. "You

"I washed you to save yore life," the cowboy answered harshly. "You was buried face down in the swamp, and yore clothes weighed a ton. Yo're just like an old cow what has bogged herself down in a soap-hole, and fights the feller who drags her out!"

"I'll laugh when you dance on a rope," the girl barked at him.

"You won't ever live to talk about me around camp fires!"

Stud Pringle stared at her and his eyes widened until the laugh wrinkles spread across his face. His heavy coat had fallen away to reveal the firm sloping whiteness of her shoulders, and the red glow of the fire painted her skin with flattering shadows and high lights.

"Seeing that yore so finicky, you better fix yore coat," he drawled lazily.

Jess Sorday gasped and pulled the coat up around her shoulders with both hands. The cowboy made a leap from his heels like a tree cat when the gun lowered, and his thumb caught under the firing pin when his hurtling body bore the girl to the ground. He wrenched the weapon savagely from her slipping fingers as he came to his knees. The girl kicked loose from the blankets and charged at him like a young tiger.

Stud Pringle slipped the gun down into the band of his overalls and caught her in his powerful arms. His breath quickened and warm blood rushed through his veins as he crushed her writhing body against him to hold her prisoner. She struggled furiously, kicking viciously at his shins, forgetting entirely that the large mackinaw only reached half way down to her knees. Stud was completely entranced by the sight of those lovely white legs waving wildly and ineffectually in the firelight. Finally he grunted:

"You ain't exactly in fighting gear, gal. Now I aim to turn you loose while I keep my eyes closed tight, and then I'll turn my back while you get into some dry riggin'."

He felt the lithe body stiffen against him, and he could feel the wild sudden pumping of her heart against his chest. He closed his eyes and dropped his arms to his side. Something soft and warm brushed his cheek just as he turned his back and walked to the opposite side of the fire.

"Thanks, cowboy," a husky voice whispered. "I made a mistake. I think you're the squarest man I ever met!"

Stud walked away from the fire and out into the swamp of Tule Lake. He made his way straight to the stallion and spoke softly while he threw off pigging string and lass-rope. Then he helped the big stallion get to its feet and stroked the muddy neck while the horse whinnied and nudged him with dripping muzzle.

"You mind if I wash you down, Blue?" he whispered softly. "Over there in that basin where the footing is hard and the water is clean?"

STUD PRINGLE grinned when he led the big stallion to the camp-fire, and he turned his back to drive a picket pin so that Jess Sorday could not see his face. His long overalls were turned up a foot to make enormous cuffs on her slender legs, and his heavy woolen shirt hid her alluring beauty like a monk's shapeless robe.

The girl watched breathlessly as the stallion nudged his master, and her hands went gingerly to the rope-burn just above her still-aching hips. The big horse was steaming in the red glow of the

fire, and Stud shook his head as he glanced at the slender pile of blankets.

"Got to dry Blue before I can ride," he said over his shoulder. "You'll find bacon and beans in my greasy sack if yo're a mind to stir us up a bait of grub."

He turned swiftly when a pair of strong, little hands gripped his shoulders. Jess Sorday had managed somehow to brush her golden hair, and the cowboy caught his breath as he realized how pretty she was, standing, facing him and studying his tanned face with sober brown eyes that were now soft with a new light.

"I'm sorry I said what I did, Stud," the girl began in a quiet earnest voice. "I sat here by the fire and watched you wash Blue to get all the mud off. He stood there as though he knew you was making him clean again, and now I feel the same way. I mean I feel . . . clean."

Stud Pringle growled in his throat and looked away. "A hoss can tell from the feel in a feller's hands just what he's thinking," he answered slowly. "Blue Hell ran with the wild bunch until I caught him, and now it looks like I'll do the same thing."

"You can't beat anything by running away," the girl said slowly. "Won't you go back with me, Stud?"

The cowboy laughed mockingly. "Thanks, lady," and he shook his head. "There wasn't any witnesses except Blue when I shot it out with Buck Cawthorn. You going to rassle the grub?"

He turned his head suddenly to glance at the girl when she did not answer. Jess was staring at the big stallion, and the horse was listening with ears pricked toward the outer darkness. Then the girl threw herself in Stud's arms and caught the hand that was slapping down to the gun in his waist band.

"HOLD it, Pringle," a deep voice commanded sternly. "I got a gun centered on yore back!"

Stud stiffened and bit down hard on his teeth. His fingers were wrapped around the handle of his sixgun, his calloused thumb ready to ear back the heavy hammer. But the gun was jammed deep under the blue denim of his levis while the girl gripped his hand to prevent a draw. His blue eyes were smoky with anger as he lowered his head and stared at her.

"You still feel clean?" he asked thinly. "Talking the way you did, and then pinning me down for the law?"

He could feel the throb of her heart through the breast that was pressed tightly against his chest. It beat wildly like something that sought escape. Stud's muscles tensed to tear free of the girl.

"Please, Stud," the girl pleaded. "It's dad, and he *will* shoot!"

The cowboy stood still, breathing hard, as footsteps came up behind him. The muzzle of a gun pressed coldly against his spine when a deep voice spoke close to his ear.

"Lift 'em high, cowboy. Then slide them hands behind you while I decorate 'em!"

The girl released her hold and stepped away, her head hanging

low, her eyes avoiding his accusing ones. Stud whistled shrilly between his teeth, a soft sibilant sound like the sucking in of startled breath. Slowly he pushed his hands behind his broad back.

HIS muscles stiffened when the gun was removed, and then he threw himself to the ground as a blue shadow streaked into the firelight.

He felt the burn of a bullet scrape his left shoulder as the sheriff's gun exploded, and he rolled up to his knees just in time to catch a glimpse of the officer's body hurtling across the little clearing. The blue stallion had hit the sheriff in that sudden mad charge, and now the big horse was rearing high to chop his victim with sledge-hammer hoofs.

Stud Pringle shot up from his knees with a hoarse shout tearing from his throat. He was afraid he would be too late to save Sheriff Sorday, and in desperation he threw his weight full against the flanks of the plunging horse. A thousand pounds of fury thundered down to miss the fallen man by inches. Stud jumped in front of the horse, his arms encircling the steaming wet neck.

"Easy, Blue," he crooned softly. "Stand!"

The big stallion whistled defiantly and tried to crowd past Stud to get at the prostrate man. The cowboy pushed him back inch by inch while he talked softly, and his face hardened when the girl ran across the clearing and knelt beside her father. No change of expression crossed his face as she gave a little cry of joy.

"He's alive, Stud. You saved his life!"

Stud was drawing his lass-rope in, coiling it until he came to the loose picket-pin. He bent to pick up his fallen gun. "Tell him when he rouses round," he grated harshly. "I won't be taken, and if he cuts my sign, it's either him or me!"

The sheriff stirred restlessly before the girl could answer. Stud saw the move and vaulted lightly to the stallion's back, and the big horse whirled just as the girl picked up her father's weapon. The gun flashed in the firelight, swung to cover the fleeing figure of the cowboy. He would be gone in the darkness unless she pressed trigger, and Jess Sorday burst into tears when the gun slipped from her nerveless fingers.

The heavy forty-five was snatched from her hand before it had slipped to the ground, and the girl screamed when she saw her father thumb back the hammer and throw a shot across the fire. Stud jerked forward when the battered Stetson was whipped from his head, and then the thunder of hoofs echoed back from the darkness.

"You hit him," the girl sobbed. "After he had saved your life!"

The sheriff pushed her aside and started across the clearing in a crouch. "I heard what he said," he said harshly. "Either him or me, and he won't get far!"

Jess Sorday caught him at the edge of the fire and blocked him off from the trees. "You've got to listen to me," she screamed savagely. "He saved both you and

me, and he could have killed you when you were down!"

Old Jess Sorday stopped and stared at this daughter of his, who bore the same name as himself. He had always wanted a son, and she was all the kin he had. For the first time her words seemed to penetrate to his brain, and he lowered his cocked gun and turned back to the fire.

"Tell me," he growled under his breath, and sat down.

"My horse broke his leg," the girl explained jerkily. "So I took my rope and hid out there in the swamp to snare a horse when the wild 'uns came down to drink. I've heard you tell how the outlaws did it, tying themselves to the rope to wear down the horse when he stampeded through the mud."

"You did that?" the sheriff muttered. "You let a wild hoss drag you through that muck over yonder?"

The girl nodded her head. "I roped Blue Hell," she whispered. "He would have killed me, but Stud Pringle was hiding nearby, and he got his rope on him. I was unconscious and buried in the mud when he rescued me!"

The sheriff growled under his breath and fingered his heavy six-gun. "I'll take him alive," he swore savagely. "That's the law, gal. You and me both took an oath, and nothing else counts!"

HE turned his head to glance when the girl did not answer. She was staring across the fire at a tall cowboy standing just at the edge of the timber. He was swaying gently from side to side and a trickle of crimson spilled down through his tousled tawny hair and made a streak across his bronzed cheek. He was watching her father, and his hands were empty and hanging at his sides.

"I've come back, sheriff," a husky voice boomed across the clearing. "Holster yore iron before you turn around!"

Old Jess Sorday stiffened and automatically sheathed the gun in his holster. Then he straightened up and turned slowly, and his face clouded when he saw Stud Pringle facing him, his big brown hands hooked in the band of his Levis.

"Yo're under arrest," he barked. "You'll get a fair trial!"

"I come back to get it when you knocked me off my hoss," the cowboy answered grimly. "They ain't much cheating in gun-smoke law!"

"He's wounded, dad," the girl whispered in a hushed voice. "It wouldn't be fair!"

"Back," the sheriff grunted coldly. "I'll take him dead or alive!"

"Start pitching, law-man," the cowboy whispered, and swayed forward like a man in a dream.

Sheriff Jess Sorday tightened his lips and his big right hand slapped down suddenly for the gun on his leg. The lean cowboy shadowed the move and went for the gun in the band of his overalls. Both weapons flashed at the same time but only one roared to shatter the night stillness.

The sheriff cursed angrily when a lithe muscled body hit him in the ribs and sent him spinning to spoil his aim. Growling like a bear, he tore himself loose from the arms of his daughter and whirled to face

the expected bullet. An expression of amazement spread across his face when he failed to find Stud Pringle. Then he saw the cowboy sprawled on the ground, his hands stretched toward the fire.

"It would have been murder," he whispered hoarsely. "He was out on his feet!"

Flying boots passed him when the girl ran to the cowboy and gathered his head up in her arms. She shuddered and moaned in her throat when her fingers found the tawny hair. Then she cuddled his head against her breast and rocked slowly back and forth.

"His gun was empty," she sobbed. "I took the bullets from it while he was making coffee!"

"You mean you was going to let me shoot it out, and him with an empty iron?" the sheriff rasped.

"He's faster than you, dad," the girl murmured. "If he had killed you. . . ?"

Sheriff Sorday holstered his gun and went to his knees. "Yo're the only chip I got, Jess," he began softly. "You mind telling a man?"

"He saved me back there in the swamp," the girl whispered. "Washed me clean, and I wanted to kill him. But I couldn't, dad. So I unloaded the gun, and then he took it away from me. I saw him go out there and wash his blue horse, and somehow I felt all clean again."

"Him and Blue Hell," the old officer grunted. "Both of 'em wild as they come in these parts."

"And clean," the girl added softly. "Dad?"

The sheriff turned his head and stared at her pretty face. "Huh?" he grunted.

"You always said that every man was entitled to the right to defend himself," the girl answered steadily. "Buck Cawthorn tried to kill Blue Hell, and then he and Stud shot it out. Wouldn't you call that self-defense?"

"Yes, if he could prove it," the sheriff answered promptly. "What you getting at?"

"Buck Cawthorn didn't die," the girl continued. "You haven't a warrant, because he didn't sign any complaint."

The sheriff studied a moment and turned his head to stare at the glowing fire. "In a manner of speaking, looks like you and me both made a mistake," he muttered slowly. "Stud ain't even wanted unless Cawthorn signs the complaint, and even then mebbe that cowboy could beat the charge." He straightened up and walked out of the circle of fire.

A moment later he was back leading his horse. "Tell Stud he ain't wanted," he growled under his breath. "But bring him in anyhow just to clear things up. You ain't much of a deputy, and I could use a good fast hand like him."

JESS SORDAY felt her heart jump when her father climbed his scarred saddle and walked his horse out of the fire-light. She listened until the sound of hoofs had died away, and her arms tightened as she felt the cowboy move restlessly. His cheek rested against the soft swell of her bosom as he slowly opened his eyes.

"I couldn't shoot him," he whispered wearily. "The law wins, little feller."

Jess Sorday lowered her curly head until her brown eyes were close to his face. "The sheriff said to tell you we made a mistake," she whispered softly. "He said you wasn't wanted."

Stud Pringle tensed and then pushed himself up to a sitting position. "Not wanted?" he echoed. "You mind telling a man?"

"There isn't even a warrant for you," the girl explained. "Dad had to follow you because you didn't stay to prove your innocence."

"I'm not wanted?" the cowboy whispered hoarsely.

"You are wanted, Stud," a little voice contradicted softly. "I can hear Blue stomping out there, and he wants you. Dad said I wasn't much of a deputy, and he wants you to take my job. And Stud?"

"Yeah, little feller."

"Do I have to say it, cowboy?" and the brown-eyed girl hid her face against his shoulder. "Dad said for me to bring you in just to clear things up. You'll come with me?"

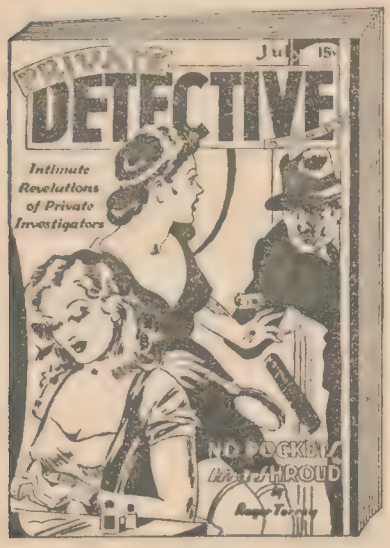
Stud Pringle shook his head to clear away the fog. Then he grinned and took Jess Sorday gently in his strong arms. "I'll go back under one condition," he whispered in her curls. "I'll go back if I'm still wanted . . . by you!"

Jess Sorday sighed with happiness. "I'm going to have your picture put on a poster," and she raised her head to meet his lips. "And right up at the top I'm going to have big letters printed so you will get a life sentence."

"Tell it big, little feller," Stud Pringle answered soberly. "What you going to have printed at the top?"

The girl cuddled close to him there on the edge of Tule Lake. Cupped her lips to his ear and whispered softly.

"WANTED!"



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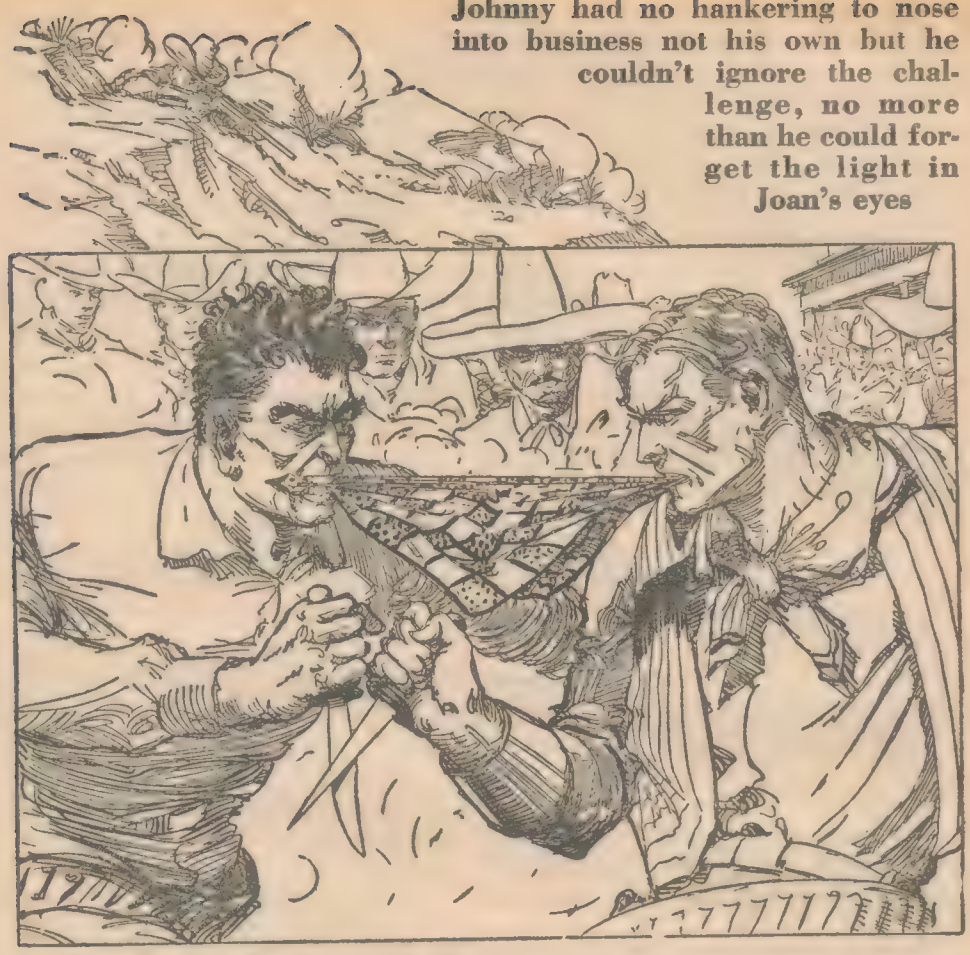
Johnny had no hankering to nose into business not his own but he couldn't ignore the challenge, no more than he could forget the light in Joan's eyes



JOHNNY BRETT checked his paint abruptly, trying to peer over the heads of the crowd. After all, he was a stranger and he didn't want to go sticking his nose into something that was none of his business the first minute he got into town. At first he could see nothing; the men before him blocked the whole street from the General Store on the right to the Palace Saloon on the left. Then the low muttering died and one voice came clearly to his ears.

"You passel of polecats!" it cried. "You yellow-bellied coyotes! If guts was gunpowder, there wouldn't be enough in this whole town to make me sneeze!"

The crowd's murmur began again, angrily and uncertainly, and with it groups of men shifted a little and Johnny could see the speaker. He was a big red-headed man who stood in an open space in the crowd's center. His hair was tousled, his eyes rolling. In his right hand he held a long, gleaming bowie knife and, gripped in his teeth, was a brilliantly colored bandanna.

Puzzled, Johnny looked down

By REX NORMAN

HELLSTICK • HAVEN •

and caught the eye of a rangy puncher who stood next to his horse.

"What in thunder's goin' on here?" Johnny asked.

The puncher looked up, half angry and half ashamed.

"It's 'Savvy' Carson," he explained, "foreman of the Box B.

The Winchester barked again. One waddy went over like a ten-pin; the other men got to their feet, guns in hands.

He's orey-eyed drunk and he wants someone to fight with."

"Fight?"

"Yeah! Take the other end of the bandanna in his teeth and hold on to it while he and Savvy cut each other up with knives. First man that lets go, loses."

Johnny scrutinized the red-headed challenger. The bandanna was about eighteen inches from corner to corner. Anchored to the end of that while the knife slashed at you, a man might as well be committing suicide. Johnny shook his head.

"But that's crazy!"

"Ya don't say!" said the puncher next to him. "Why'n hell do you think he ain't got no takers?"

"Why, you slab-sided, sow-bellied short-horns!" Carson was sneering. "You side-windin' horn toads! Ain't there a *man* in the whole mangy lot of ya?"

JOHNNY'S jaw muscles knotted angrily, and, throwing the reins over his paint's head, he swung out of the saddle. Roughly he pushed his way through the crowd. A Mexican was standing in the front row, glowering at the swaggering waddy. The hilt of a knife showed above the top of his ornate boots. Johnny bent and whipped it out.

"What about it, *amigo?*" he asked. "Lend me this for a minute?"

The Mexican's eyes widened, then he grinned.

"*Si, si, señor! Con mucho gusto!*"

"I repeat," Carson was bellowing, "ain't there *one,* just one hombre in this town who'll . . .?"

"Yeah!" said Johnny walking forward, "there is! And he's gonna cut his brand in your hide!"

The red-headed puncher's eyes swung toward him and they were suddenly cold, seeming to probe Johnny's very soul. Another instant and Johnny had picked up a corner of the handkerchief in his teeth. A cheer went up from the crowd behind him as he stepped back, crouched, and with the bandanna stretched tight between his jaws and Carson's, started a slow circling. The red-headed puncher was bent forward in a fighting crouch, too, his knife ready, his eyes fixed on Johnny's. Both knives quivered a moment in half feints, then Carson's darted out in a lightning slash. Steel rasped and grated as Johnny parried. Then scraped again as he cut back. That blow was parried too.

A change came over Carson's face. It lost its wild, drunken look and he grinned. Raising his knife he slashed, not at Johnny, but at the bandanna they both held in their teeth. He spat his half out of his mouth and threw down his bowie knife so that it buried itself up to the hilt in the ground.

"All right, stranger," he said. "You'll do!"

"Do?" repeated Johnny wonderingly as another murmur went up from the crowd behind him, a murmur of surprise, of anger, and disappointment.

"Yeah," answered Carson. "I been lookin' for a man with guts for a week. You're him."

"What?" shouted the rangy puncher who had first spoken to Johnny. "Why, for two cents . . !"

Carson stiffened. "What I said before still goes," he gritted cold-

ly. "There ain't a man in the lot of you who'll stand up to me . . . with a knife *or* a sixgun. Now, *vamos,* the lot of you. I got business to talk over with this hombre."

Muttering under their breaths, the crowd started to break up in little groups, to walk up the street or into the saloon. A slow grin crept over Johnny's face. He tossed the knife back to the Mexican.

"Thanks, *amigo,*" he said. "It's still as good as new."

"That your cayuse?" asked Carson. Johnny nodded. "Then let's get going."

He walked over to a black that was hitched in front of the General Store and climbed into the saddle. Johnny swung up onto his paint and they rode slowly out of town.

"What's your handle?" asked Carson. Johnny told him. "They call me 'Savvy'," Carson went on, "and for once it looks like I got plenty of it. I told the boss I'd bring out a man with more guts than anyone else in the county and I guess I got him."

"The boss?"

"Yeah, of the Box B spread. It's only about a half hour ride out of town."

THE ranch house of the Box B was a roomy 'dobe building. The spread itself looked good except that the range seemed dangerously dry. The grass was turning yellow and the cottonwoods in the distance looked wilted. Savvy took Johnny's horse.

"I'll put him in the corral," he said, "you go on in. If the boss ain't around, knock on the door to the right."

Johnny nodded, went up the steps and into the house. He found himself in a large room. There was no one there. He waited a minute, then walked to the door to the right and knocked.

" . . . come in," called a muffled voice. Johnny turned the knob, pushed open the door, then stood there, his eyes bugging out of his head. Before him, in the middle of the room, stood a girl in her underthings!

She had evidently been changing her clothes, for riding boots and breeches lay on the floor in front of her. A filmy wisp of silk circled her waist and a tight bandeau cupped her rounded bosom. She was holding a slip in her hands, ready to draw it over her head. They both stood there a moment, staring at each other, her eyes fixed on Johnny's lean young face; Johnny's unconsciously traveling slowly down over her perfect figure.

She recovered from her surprise first and lifted the slip to cover herself. She flushed angrily.

"Damn you!" she choked. "I said '*Don't* come in'!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," apologized Johnny, "Savvy told me. . . ."

"Get out!" she snapped. "Stop gawkin' at me and get out!"

"Yes, ma'am." He took a last look that sent the crimson flooding through flawless skin, then went out and shut the door behind him.

The after effects of what he had just seen were beginning to come over him. There was a dry taste in his mouth and a pulse throbbing in his temple, when Savvy entered.

"Listen," said Johnny, "don't tell me that the boss of this here outfit is a woman!"

Savvy looked a little uncomfortable. "Well, yeah. I didn't say so before 'cause some waddies don't like workin' for a female, but let me tell you, she's all right. And she knows as much about ranchin' as her daddy did before her! But that ain't all. Wait'll ya see her."

Johnny grinned. "I can hardly wait," he said ambiguously. The door behind him opened now and the girl appeared. She was wearing a print dress that fitted her tightly and it required all Johnny's will power to make his eyes behave. There was no doubt about it, Johnny had fallen hard. There was the woman for him!

"Hi, Joan," said Savvy. "This is Johnny Brett. Johnny, Miss Joan Dixon, boss of the Box B."

They nodded to each other, Johnny with a slight smile, Joan coldly.

"What makes you think he'll do?" she asked.

"Listen, Joan, he's a stranger round here, but he's got more real nerve under his finger nails than anyone else around here's got in their whole body." Quickly he told her what he had done in town that morning, how he had pretended to be drunk, and how he had met Johnny. When he finished, she looked at Johnny with interest in her eyes.

"Want a job?" she asked.

"Mebbe," answered Johnny warily. "What's the story?"

She studied his face for a minute. "What do you think of this spread?" she asked.

"Looks fine. Only a litle dry."

"Dry? It's burning up. Used to have the best water around here, but not any more."

JOHNNY looked across the range to the line of cottonwoods. "Isn't that a creek over there?"

"It *used* to be a creek, now it's an arroyo. But if you're the man Savvy thinks you are, it'll be a creek again, damn' soon." She leaned closer. "The rancher up at the head of the valley is named Calhoun. He's got the Lazy Diamond, a bigger ranch than this. Last month he threw a dam across the creek and . . ." she pointed out the windows, "that's what happened to my range."

"Hmm," said Johnny. "What you doin' about it?"

"I talked to Calhoun. He laughed and said he had a bigger spread than me, that he needed a reservoir for his own cattle. I went to court but I couldn't get an injunction. He's too powerful around here. I'll get a decision yet, but it may take months. What am I going to do in the meantime, let my cattle die? My range burn up?"

Savvy growled deep in his throat. "Like hell!"

"So," Joan went on, "I went out and bought me a case of dynamite."

"Blow the dam up, get our water through," put in Savvy, "and let the courts decide about it later!"

"Where do I come in?" asked Johnny.

"It's a two man job," explained Joan. "Calhoun's no fool. He's got guards at the dam. One man'll have to keep them busy while the other sets the hellsticks. There isn't anyone around here with guts enough to buck Calhoun, to help me and

Savvy fight him. Will you help us?"

She was leaning forward eagerly, the rounded curves of her bosom pressing against the thin cloth of her dress, her lips parted eagerly. Her nearness started the pulse in Johnny's temples throbbing again, but he kept his face wooden.

"What's in it for me?" he asked.

"A job here," she answered, "and a bonus of five hundred dollars."

"That's all?" he asked softly.

"Judas Priest," exploded Savvy, "what do you want, the ranch?"

Johnny shook his head slowly. "No," he said, but his eyes were on Joan, meaningly, questioningly. She was utterly perfect he decided at that moment. A flush crept over her cheeks, perhaps because she had just remembered that not fifteen minutes before he had seen her only partially dressed.

"You . . . you can have anything else you want," she faltered, "that's reasonable." There was a light in her eyes that stirred him to the core.

Johnny smiled. "*Bueno.*" He let his eyes travel down over her lissome curves, noting the quickened heaving of her bosom. "Then I'm your man." And he meant it in more ways than one.

THE next morning was blazingly hot. The sun baked down on Johnny's back as he lay on the parched grass behind the corral sighting a Winchester carbine. He made a last adjustment on the rear sight, then stretched out again, elbows and feet spread wide, stock cuddled close to his cheek. The knife front-sight notched the target he had set up on a cottonwood two hundred and fifty yards away. He squeezed the shot off, felt the stock recoil against his shoulder.

"How ya doin'?" asked a voice behind him.

He rolled over. It was Savvy. Johnny picked up the last sighting target he had shot and handed it to him in answer. Savvy looked at the grouping of the six bullet holes. He could cover them with the palm of his hand. He whistled softly and admiringly.

"At over two hundred and fifty yards! That's shooting!"

Johnny shrugged. "Pretty good. When are we gonna make our play? Tonight?"

"Well," answered Savvy, "I don't know. Maybe we won't have to make it at all."

There was a slightly worried look in his eyes. Johnny rose to his feet.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Joan thought she'd like to take a last crack at speakin' to Calhoun. She went up to the dam about a half hour ago."

"Alone?"

Savvy looked really uncomfortable now. "Yeah. Said if we went along there'd be trouble."

Johnny cursed under his breath. "And from what you told me of Calhoun, you don't think there'll be trouble if she sees him alone?" He grabbed up the Winchester from the ground and started running back toward the corral. "Come on! And take the hellsticks with you!"

JOHNNY'S throat was sore. He had been swearing steadily for

almost an hour now; at Savvy for having let Joan go to see Calhoun alone; at the fact that he didn't know the trail and had to follow the Box B foreman. And at Savvy's seemingly snail-like pace. This last he knew was silly. Who would want to ride hell for leather through these arroyos with a sack of capped dynamite sticks dangling from his saddle horn? Yet Johnny couldn't help it. All his rage seemed focused on a man he had never seen, on Calhoun.

They came to the top of a rise and Savvy held up a warning hand.

"The dam's right ahead," he whispered, standing up in his stirrups, "but I don't see. . . ."

That was all Johnny heard. Whipping the Winchester out of its scabbard, he had thrown himself out of the saddle, pushed past Savvy and was running up to the top of the rise. The white concrete mass of the dam was about twenty feet below him, curving across the arroyo. On one side of it the cool depths of the dammed creek, on the other its dried-up bed, twisting like a muddy snake back toward the Box B.

He stood there for a moment, his keen eyes slitted. There was a heap of boulders on the far side of the dam, but nothing moved. Wait! There, in the shadow of the chaparral clump, was a horse. Joan's horse. He took a step forward to see if she might be hidden from him by the boulders, and at that moment a sound that froze his blood echoed between the narrow walls of the arroyo. A woman's scream, followed by harsh, wolfish laughter!

There was a rattle of loose shale and then Savvy was standing beside him, the sack of dynamite slung over his shoulder.

"What in thunder . . .?" he began.

"Look!" gritted Johnny. From behind the pile of rocks dashed Joan, running for her horse. Five waddies were running after her, a sixth sauntering out slowly to lean against the rocks and watch, puffing on a cigarette. Johnny could see that the girl's blouse had been torn to shreds, and that her lovely heaving bosom was almost completely exposed, before she went down under the avalanche of their bodies.

"Calhoun!" gasped Savvy, "and the boys from the Lazy Diamond!" He started to drop the sack of dynamite, his hand diving down for his sixgun. "Damn them! I'll. . . ."

Johnny, his eyes cold as ice, gave him a shove that sent him halfway down toward the dry creek bed.

"Go on!" he cried. "Plant those hellsticks! This is my job!"

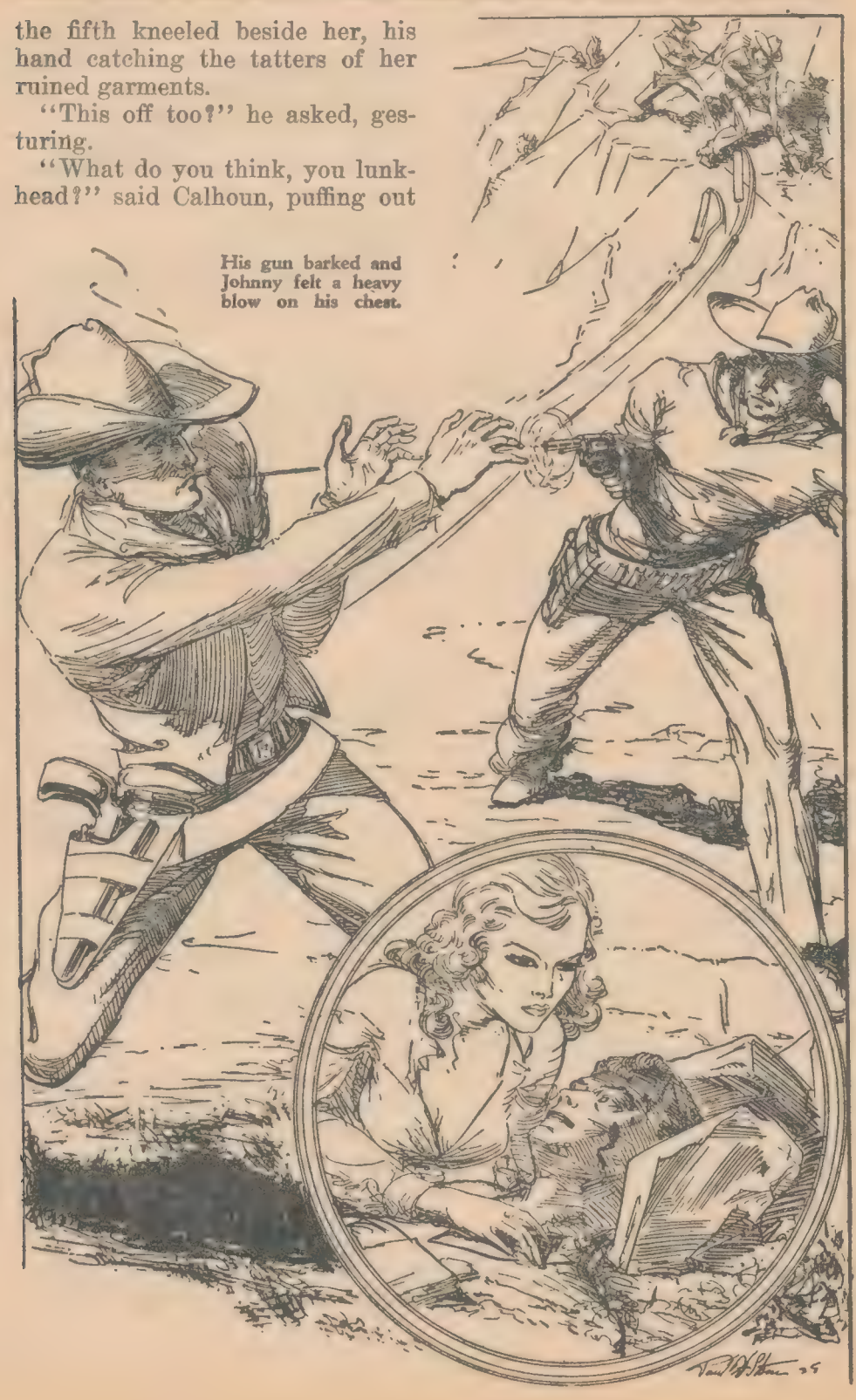
SAVVY hesitated only a moment, nodded, and went running toward the dam. The Winchester was at Johnny's shoulder now and, gritting his teeth, he waited. There was no sense getting Calhoun, leaning against the rock, and he couldn't shoot into that mass of struggling bodies without the chance of hitting Joan. He had no choice. He *had* to wait. It was only a moment till the men overpowered her, but it seemed like ages.

They separated, four of them holding her hands and legs while

the fifth kneeled beside her, his hand catching the tatters of her ruined garments.

"This off too?" he asked, gesturing.

"What do you think, you lunkhead?" said Calhoun, puffing out



His gun barked and Johnny felt a heavy blow on his chest.

a cloud of smoke. "We're gonna do this job right."

"Just as you say, boss." The waddy's voice was hoarse, eager. Even as Joan moaned, even as the puncher tightened his hold on straining cloth, Johnny's finger squeezed the trigger. It was a long shot, a dangerous shot. The kneeling puncher's body was almost in a line with Joan's, but Johnny could hold back no longer. The rifle roared. There was a thud and the puncher's body jerked, arched backward, then rolled over and lay still.

"What in . . .?" gasped Calhoun. But the Winchester barked again. The waddy who held Joan's right foot went over like a ten-pin. The three remaining men were on their feet now, guns in their hands.

"There he is!" yelled Calhoun, spotting the figure on the arroyo's rim. Frantically he leaped behind the pile of rocks, sending a slug whizzing past Johnny's head. The three men from the Lazy Diamond were firing also now and one bullet passed so close to Johnny's cheek that he could feel its breeze.

He caught a glimpse of Joan alone near the clump of chaparral, rising weakly to her feet, the upper half of her body red and scratched, then he was following the three punchers with his swinging sights. Again the carbine barked and one of them stumbled and pitched forward on his face.

"Hurry, Joan! Hurry!" yelled a voice from the bottom of the dam.

Savvy! Johnny had forgotten about him! The red-headed puncher was kneeling in the arroyo, the fuse of the bundle of dynamite in one hand, a lit match in the other. Joan saw him and gasped, then she ran toward her horse, vaulted into the saddle and came galloping down the side of the arroyo toward him. But Calhoun and the two waddies who were left had seen him too.

"Dynamite!" yelled Calhoun. "Don't let him. . ." He fired at Savvy and the Box B foreman flinched. Johnny emptied the three remaining shots in his magazine at the pile of rocks and drove Calhoun back out of sight. As he dropped the carbine and whipped out his sixgun, he saw Savvy put the match to the fuse. Then Joan was at the bottom of the arroyo, Savvy had swung up behind her and they were thundering up the slope toward him.

JOHNNY sent a brace of shots from the sixgun toward the rock pile but Calhoun and his boys had had enough. He could see them, running toward their horses, keeping as much under cover as they could. He bent down, grabbed the bridle of Joan's horse as it came up the slope and helped the animal scramble up the last few feet of the arroyo's side. He saw Savvy swaying slightly, a red stain spreading over his chest. Reaching up, he swept Joan into his arms.

"Get into that saddle!" he snapped to the wounded man. Savvy moved forward and then Johnny slapped the horse and sent him galloping down toward safety. Joan's half nude body in his arms, he went running after him. Her eyes were wide as he cradled her against his chest, but there was a

half smile on her lips. On Johnny ran, his legs pumping, his heart pounding.

Then there was a deafening explosion behind them. A giant hand seemed to push him forward and he fell, crushing Joan's body between his own and the ground, feeling against him the trembling and the warmth of her. He continued to lie there a minute, still holding her tight in his arms, not because he couldn't move but because he didn't want to.

There was a roaring in his ears. At first he thought it was the pounding of the blood in his veins, but then he realized it was the sound of the released waters pouring down toward the Box B ranch.

"Well," he said to the girl in his arms. "We did it."

She nodded, her breath coming quicker and quicker as he started to bend down toward her parted lips. But he checked himself. Savvy! That wound of his had to be attended to. They had done what they had set out to do—blown up the dam. The job at the Box B was his, the bonus and . . . what had she said? "Anything else that's reasonable." Slowly Johnny released her. He could wait.

JOHNNY looked across the bunkhouse and grinned. Savvy was sitting up in his bunk, the bandage that covered his punctured shoulder white in the light of the kerosene lamps, and he was telling the story of what they had done that morning for the tenth time to any of the Box B hands who would listen. Johnny felt strangely restless. Finally he got up and went to the door. The ranch house was dark. Joan must be asleep.

Shrugging his shoulders, he started walking down toward the creek. He could hear it purling between its banks, almost feel the dry range growing green and alive again, but he wanted to get closer to it. He wanted to actually see it.

The moon was bright and clear, pouring like molten silver on the rippling water. Aimlessly he started walking downstream toward a copse of cottonwoods. He reached them and, leaning against the trunk of one of the trees, he took out the makings and built a smoke. Then he stiffened, listening. What was that splashing sound? He stole nearer the creek, eyes roving, and the cigarette dropped from his fingers. There, standing in the water almost up to her shoulders, was Joan!

She stood there, the white flesh of her body, long, slim legs magnified and distorted by the rippling flood. Her head was thrown back, her eyes half closed, and she was lifting handfuls of the water and letting it trickle down over her face and shoulders. There was an almost sensual smile on her lips as she stood there like a pagan river nymph and somehow, as his eyes traced the curves of her lovely figure, Johnny knew what had drawn her to the creek at night.

The ranch was hers and she felt a definite kinship between it and her body. Now that the creek was bringing life to the parched range again, she had to feel its waters on her flesh as well. There was a dryness- in Johnny's mouth, a hammering in his temples. She was more lovely, more alluring now

than she had been even when he had first seen her. More enticing than any woman would ever be again. Slowly he went forward. Just as he got to the creek's edge, he stepped on a stick and she looked up and saw him. With a soft cry she crouched down in the water, covering herself with her hands.

Her eyes were wide. "Go away," she faltered.

He took another step forward, the water licking halfway up his boots.

"You know," he said, "you promised."

"I . . . I said anything that was reasonable, but . . ."

He laughed shortly, pointing at the moon, the bright stars above them.

"Could anything be reasonable," he asked, "on a night like this?"

She was straightening up slowly, a strange look in her eyes.

"No, Johnny," she answered. "Nothing could be reasonable . . . and everything is possible. If . . . if you'll close your eyes, I'll come out."

He closed his eyes and waited, hearing the splashing nearer as she came toward him. Then he heard her soft breathing as she scrambled up the bank to put on her clothes and, after a minute, he could hold himself back no longer. He opened his eyes, and his arms went out. Her body, still wet under the thin chemise she had slipped into crushed against his, her firm bosom flattened against his chest.

"Johnny, no!" she whispered, her eyes wide. He bent and pressed his mouth to hers, sealing it against further protests. His arms tightened as she tried to draw away, his hands sliding caressingly down her back. She started to tremble, but he could feel her tense muscles relaxing. He kissed her again and again, on her eyes, the hollow of her neck.

ONE lamp was still burning in the bunkhouse when Johnny got back to it. Savvy was asleep and so were the other boys. Johnny had started to strip off his clothes, still damp in spots from its contact with Joan, when he stopped, staring at the glittering flecks that clung to his sleeve. He picked one off and examined it under the light, and a strange look came into his eyes.

Savvy stirred sleepily and opened his eyes.

"Hi, Johnny," he said.

"Hi, Savvy." He looked down quizzically at the wounded man. "Do you like ranching?"

Savvy was just sleepy enough not to be surprised.

"Of course I like it. Been doin' it all my life. Besides, what else am I good for?"

"That's right," said Johnny softly. "What else are any of us good for?" He looked down at Savvy a minute longer, before he turned down the kerosene lamp. But instead of undressing further, he went out of the bunkhouse again. He walked up to the ranch house and when he got to Joan's window, tapped on it gently. The room was dark. Then there was a creaking of springs, a soft stirring within, and Joan's lovely face appeared, framed by the window. Johnny's jaw muscles tightened. She looked lovely, a sheer nightgown accen-

tuating instead of concealing the beauty of her figure.

"Johnny!" The surprise in her eyes changed to a look of pleasure. "Oh, darling!" Her arms went out and around his neck. He kissed her, resolutely trying not to think of anything but what he had to ask her.

"Hello, honey," he said. Then, "How'd you like to be rich? Very rich?"

"Rich?" She frowned slightly. "But I am. I've got the ranch. It gives me and the boys a good living . . . and now I've got you." Her fingers stroked his cheek.

"But how about lots of money?" he insisted. "Fine clothes? A chance to live in the city?"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't want that. I like it here. I like this country and I like this life." She looked at him. "Why are you asking me?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Just a crazy idea," he answered evasively. And his arms went around her and he crushed her to him until she moaned faintly, until he could feel her heart pounding against his chest through the sheer silk.

"Good night," he whispered. "God bless you!" Turning, he walked slowly back to the bunkhouse.

NO ONE saw him slip into the store house the following morning and take out half a dozen sticks of dynamite and a shovel. No one saw him saddle his horse and ride west along the creek toward the site of the destroyed dam. It was just as well. He was in no mood to answer questions.

When he got to the place where the dam had been, he dismounted and, leaving the dynamite in the sack tied to the saddle pommel, took the shovel and walked up the creek a way. Huge lumps of concrete were scattered about, signs of the force of the explosion on the day before. The brown water boiled in a deep pit in the stream bed. His eyes searched the side of the arroyo, before he found what he was looking for. There it was. He walked closer. His guess had been right. Running through the shale, was a vein of quartz. But it wasn't ordinary quartz. It was rich in gold!

The night before, when he had found flecks of gold dust on his sleeve he had guessed what had happened. Calhoun's dam had raised the level of the creek, allowing its waters to erode the surface shale of the arroyo and expose the gold vein. When the dam was blown up, the waters had rushed downstream carrying the gold dust with it. The dust had clung to Joan, when she bathed in the creek and had rubbed off onto his clothes when he had embraced her.

He started digging above the quartz vein to see how deep it went. There was a fortune here, several fortunes, but was gold everything? He remembered mining towns he had seen in Nevada, Montana. Sprawling blots on the landscape, spawning places of sin and vice. What would become of Savvy and the Box B boys if this became a mining, instead of a cattle district? What would money do to Joan? Would it make her any happier? He shook his head. It wouldn't make her happier and it

would put her completely beyond his reach. A puncher might marry a ranch owner but not an heiress. He had played square, however. He had asked her and her answer had filled him with even greater love for her than before.

He rammed the shovel into the soft shale and went back to his horse. Taking the sticks of dynamite from the sack, he twisted the fuses together. He tucked them under his arm and rolled a cigarette. He put it in his mouth and lit it. Blowing out a blue cloud of smoke, he half closed his eyes. It was a tough decision he was making but . . .

"Reach, hombre, and reach high!" gritted a voice behind him. His hands went up, but not high. He had to keep his elbows close to his sides since the dynamite was tucked under his left armpit. He turned. Calhoun stood there, his dark eyes wolfish under his wide hat brim, a sixgun in his hand. With him were two waddies. Whether they were the same two who had ridden off with him after the shooting the day before, Johnny did not know.

"You know who this is, don't you, boys?" asked Calhoun softly of the men behind him. "He's the hombre that cut loose on us with a Winchester yesterday. The one that got Finger, Ben, and Joey."

The men growled deep in their throats. "Well, what you waitin' for, boss?" asked one. "Let him have it!"

"Just a second." Calhoun's eyes were boring into Johnny's. "What were you doin' up here?"

Johnny's arms were clamped close to his side so that from the front the dynamite sticks couldn't be seen, only the fuses sticking out past his sleeve. The cigarette still hung from the corner of his mouth.

"Doin' here?" He shrugged. "Just lookin' around."

"Yeah? Do you always look around with a shovel?" Calhoun jerked his head to where Johnny had dug away some of the shale. "Go on up there and see what's what, boys."

THE two waddies struggled up the side of the arroyo and saw the uncovered vein. One of them whistled excitedly.

"Cripus Jenny, boss! Gold!"

"Gold?"

"A big vein! The whole side of the arroyo must be lousy with it!"

Calhoun's eyes were glowing, calculating. "It's Box B land but that doesn't matter." He swung back to Johnny. "Does anyone else know about it besides you?"

Johnny's eyes were ice hard too, but there was a half smile on his lips.

"No," he answered. "No one knows about it'. . . but us!"

A tendril of smoke curled upward from his cigarette and he coughed, bending forward. Then, in that position, his face shaded from Calhoun's vision by his hat brim, he touched the glowing tip of the cigarette to the fuse under his arm. It caught, and as it sputtered, he straightened up.

"So," there was a triumphant note in Calhoun's voice. His finger started to tighten on the trigger. "After I put you out of the way. . . ."

"You mean, after I put *you* out of the way," interrupted Johnny,

"nobody'll know!" Whipping the sputtering bundle of hellsticks from under his arm, he tossed them in a long arc up the hill toward where the two punchers were standing.

"Dynamite!" screamed one. He tried to run but slipped and fell in the loose shale.

"Dynamite!" echoed Calhoun, the blood draining from his face. "Damn you! I'll . . ." His finger tightened on the trigger even as Johnny dived toward him. His gun barked and Johnny felt a heavy blow on his chest that sent him staggering backward. Again Calhoun leveled his gun . . . and then there was a deafening roar, a blinding flash and the whole side of the arroyo seemed to leap out toward them. Calhoun tried to scream, but as he opened his mouth, a boulder as large as a horse thundered down toward him. Johnny saw it strike, heard the sickening crunch of broken bones; then a sliding wave of blackness picked him up, hurled him backward and overwhelmed him.

HIS cheek was leaning against something soft. He moved his head slightly and whatever it was, gave pleasantly. It felt so good he did it again before he opened his eyes. No wonder. He was lying near the creek at the bottom of the arroyo and Joan was cradling his head in her arms, pressing it against her bosom. It was heaving with choked sobs.

"Johnny!" she whispered. "Johnny!"

"What you cryin' for?" he asked.

"Why, I . . . I thought you were dead," she said. "I tried to find you this morning and couldn't. Then Savvy said he'd looked out of the bunkhouse window and seen you ride up the creek. I got some of the boys and followed you." She gestured toward three waddies who were gingerly removing pieces of shale that still covered his legs. "We heard the explosion and, when we got here, you were half buried." She saw the blood on his shirt and her eyes widened. "What's that? Oh, you're hurt!"

"A crease, that's all."

"But what happened?"

Johnny looked up the arroyo's side. The blast had started a slide which completely covered the vein of gold-bearing quartz. He sighed and pressed his head closer to Joan.

"I like it around here," he said, "and I like it the way it is. I don't want anything changed. I . . . uh . . . was afraid that Calhoun might try to build another dam." His eyes were on a huge rock with red splotches on it as he spoke, "But I think I fixed it so he won't. Not ever."

WATCH FOR

"ONE HABIT, GROWING"

By ROY CUTLER

COMING SOON

By LARRY DUNN

Sheriff Tom went backward with a catlike spring, as the little gun exploded in the girl's hand.

TOM RANKIN was the first sheriff and John Arthur was the first judge in Jobe Town. Together they were the first duly elected law. Tonight, in a drizzling rain that made a yellow wash of the street, spikes were being driven into the first scaffolding for a lawful gibbet.

Sheriff Tom Rankin was to preside at his first hanging in the morning. He had not considered this part of his job until it came up, and he had no stomach for the chore. For the man he was to hang by the neck in the morning, until he was dead, as Judge Arthur had decreed, was young Steve James.

Steve James would have been Sheriff Tom's brother-in-law in less than another month. But now Steve was to be hanged for the murder of Buck Simmons who had been shot in the back while carrying the payroll of the Y-H spread. So Steve could never be Sheriff Tom's brother-in-law, and Ellen James never would be the sheriff's wife.

Out in the greasy yard back of

SPIKING THE GIBBET

Sheriff Tom Rankin wasn't too sure that Ellen's brother was guilty of murder. With gruesome cadence the nails being driven into the gallows were matched by the insistent hammering of an unanswered question in his brain. What did the frilly piece of lace have to do with the case?

the jail two hammers were thumping on timbers, clinking metallically upon the heads of spikes. In his office Sheriff Tom tried to close his ears to this grisly sound, and he did close his eyes and picture the round, exquisite figure of Ellen as he had last held her in his arms.

THAT had been a night before the beginning of Jobe Town's first lawful murder trial. That night Ellen had whispered, "Kiss me, Tom. I know it was your duty to bring Steve in, but he never killed any man, and after the trial it will be all right."

Neither of them had thought then that in two weeks the spikes would be driven into a gibbet and Sheriff Tom would have it as his sworn duty to hang Steve James by the neck until he was dead. Sheriff Tom knew that tonight Ellen would come riding into Jobe Town in spite of the rain.

Even the yellow flood that would carry out the last rickety log bridge over Last Wish creek would not prevent her from riding in. When your brother is to be hanged, whether there is sunshine or rain for the ghastly event, a sister will ride.

Sheriff Tom knew Ellen would wait for the last possible hour, hoping for some word of a reprieve, perhaps of some new evidence, but tonight there still had been nothing. Steve James had refused to speak in his own defense. Had been silent about the torn fragment of filmy lace that had been caught in a silver metal bangle of his woolly chaps when he had been found, a bit of fine, silk cloth that certainly failed to match any of the garments that Steve had been wearing.

Sheriff Tom still had that piece of lace tucked away, but it was unlikely that he could go riding about in Jobe County comparing this torn bit with the various underthings of more than a hundred female critters, on the off chance that he might find the garment from which it had been torn. If Steve James could have told about it, he wouldn't.

So tonight, although Ellen James had her fierce pride, she would overcome that to ride in to see Steve. Perhaps she would break and plead for her brother, or perhaps she would only ask that Sheriff Tom delegate this hanging to Deputy Callis. Perhaps she would kiss Steve goodbye and say nothing at all.

Sheriff Tom surveyed the scuffed toes of his boots on his scarred desk, and at first he hoped the bridges would be washed out before she reached Last Wish creek. No. He didn't wish that either. For she would try fording the flood where no cayuse could possibly swim. So the hanging of Steve James in the morning would be a comparatively easy chore to facing the girl in the forthcoming hour.

Even now Sheriff Tom had the feeling he was being watched. There were those of his townsmen who doubted that he would carry out his sworn duty. Joe Lane, who had wanted the first job of sheriffing for Jobe Town, and who was to marry Belle Arthur, the daughter of Judge Arthur and the prettiest girl in Jobe County, had openly put out that Sheriff Tom would lack

the guts to go through with the hanging.

"Tap! Tap! Tap! Tap!"

SPIKE after spike was being driven into the scantlings that would form the death scaffold. The slap and swoosh of the rain upon the grimy windows of the jail office could not drown the sharper metallic clink of hammer heads upon spike heads.

"Clink! Clink! Clink! Clink!"

Sheriff Tom twisted his huge, awkward hands. They were good hands, strong hands upon a rope when he was a top riding hand. His grey eyes narrowed upon one of the little windows. He wished he were still only a top hand, still riding the clean range. But he had wanted to help bring law into Jobe County.

Only two men were working upon the erection of the ghostly, skeleton framework of the gibbet frame. Sheriff Tom had to keep old Toby Ross constantly supplied with redeye or he wouldn't have been out there driving a single spike. Then there was Clusky, whose face was a death's head, anyway, and who dug the occasional grave required in the Boot Hill plot. Clusky would have driven nails into his own brother's coffin, if he were paid for it.

It was after midnight now and the rain had been continuous. Seemed as if the skies knew there was to be a hanging in the morning. Sheriff Tom always had been a friendly sort, with a hearty laugh and a good joke to tell. But no friendly boots came clumping along the sogged plank outside. No friend would be dropping in tonight for a casual chin, a social chaw of tobacco, or a long-drawn pipe.

Sheriff Tom lighted his own stub briar twice, but each time it went out and the filling tasted stale. He stared at the lowest window with the bars across it, and he knew he was not mistaken in believing he had seen a face there.

He was keeping this death watch alone. But Joe Lane and Deputy Callis would not be far away. Either of these would have gloated over him going softhearted, after his months of fighting to bring constituted law to Jobe County. Sheriff Tom guessed that both Joe Lane and Deputy Callis would be armed and waiting, hoping that his love for Ellen James would override his sense of duty.

AGAIN Sheriff Tom's mind came back to the circumstances of Steve's arrest and conviction. Come to think of it, it had been Joe Lane who had put him upon Steve's trail after Buck Simmons had been dry-gulched and robbed. He recalled, too, that Steve James had once made up to Belle Arthur, but the girl had made her choice of the older and the more substantial Joe Lane, who owned the general store and the saloon, and could be regarded as a man of substance.

There had been the hoofprints of a pair of hosses down by Last Wish creek where Sheriff Tom had picked up Steve. Steve had been tossed and had been lying partly in the creek when Sheriff Tom had found him. His .41 calibre had one empty shell, and it had been an odd .41 calibre bullet in Buck Simmons' back. A few gold coins of the

stolen payroll had been in Steve's pocket. The rest was missing, but the coins had been enough when Steve had refused to explain how he had come by the money. Or to explain that bit of dainty lace caught in the chaps bangle.

Right now Sheriff Tom wished Ellen James would come riding up and have it over with. Keeping a death watch over Steve was enough of itself without looking forward to the scorn and flashing hate that would be in the girl's blue eyes. He lighted his stub pipe for the third time and watched the ominous shadow across the lower bars of the window near the ground.

Crafty Joe Lane, who had identified Buck Simmons' money, and Deputy Callis who would have given his right eye to become sheriff, were enduring the discomfort of the rain to make certain Sheriff Tom was doing his duty, and no more than his duty by his prisoner.

Sheriff Tom could have no further hope with Ellen. He could see that there could be no life together for them, hitched double, with always the grisly shadow of Steve's hanged body swaying between them.

You couldn't expect a gal, even if you had been in love with her ever since she was knee-high to a grasshopper, to be marrying the man who had been duly elected to hang her brother. But he was the law, the first chosen in Jobe County, and if he didn't do this hanging, they would say—

Sheriff Tom bit savagely at a corner of a Battle-Ax plug, but in a minute he spat it out. His chawin' tobacco didn't have any taste either. A horse was slogging up in the rain. Clippety-clop! Like the sound hoofs can make only when sucking out of red clay gumbo. The hammering of the spikes went on in the back yard. There was the banging rattle of a scantling falling.

It wasn't Ellen. The rider heard the sound of the scaffold being built and the hoss's feet clopped a little faster in the rain. Sheriff Tom was alone in the bare-floored office with the criss-crossed bars over its dingy windows. He opined he would be alone until the first and dirty gray of dawn would lighten the windows.

Then all of Jobe Town would come clumping down the plank walk for the hangman's holiday. They would tell long afterward how white Sheriff Tom grew around the mouth, and how he turned his grey eyes away from the limp, dangling body with its head twisted to one side.

The driving of spikes ceased for a moment. Toby Ross banged on the jail office door. He immediately pushed his filthy, bearded face inside. He held up a bottle and jiggled it around. There wasn't slosh enough of redeye in the bottom to make a healthy swig.

It made Sheriff Tom sick, sick over a man who could drive spikes into a hanging gibbet for the sake of keeping a little rotgut in his stomach. But he produced a new bottle from his desk. Old Toby mumbled and went back to his gibbet building.

"HI, TOM! Mind if'n I tune up a bit?"

There was cheerfulness in the prisoner's voice, and no rancor

against the man who was to become his executioner. The voice was young, and husky, with a catch in it that the owner tried to conceal. Still, it was a bit unsteady and held bravado in it that attempted to drown the nervousness.

Sheriff Tom saw the fuzzily bearded face in the small grating of the single cell behind the door. The eyes were blue like Ellen's, but they were red-rimmed and the smile in them was forced.

"Sure, Steve! Play, anything you want!" sang out Sheriff Tom. "Your supper'll be comin' 'long soon, an' I ordered yuh chicken special!"

"Wal, thanks, Tom," the tone was nonchalant. "Don't go much fur chicken, so I'll be savin' yuh a drumstick. Mebbo so I'll be savin' yuh both of 'em—won't be needin' 'em much, huh?"

There were hot tears in Sheriff Tom's eyes as Steve's harmonica struck up a tune. It was shaky at first, all tremolo, but it steadied. Steve played "The Cowboy's Lament," about the only tune he knew. It had a nice, mournful line like "bur-ee me not on the lo-one prair-ee."

Sheriff Tom called, "B'lieve I hear your supper comin' now!"

The rain-soaked planks had creaked outside the jailhouse door.

Steve James laughed harshly, "Never 'lowed I'd be fattenin' beef," he said.

Sheriff Tom couldn't see the joke, and he shivered. Something damn queer about the conviction and sentencing of Steve. The sheriff fingered the trivial piece of woman's finery in one huge hand. The faint odor of perfume still lingered about it.

Hell! It wasn't the sheriff's duty to upset the open and shut evidence he had dug up himself. Nosir! Still—

Buck Simmons had been toting the monthly payroll over to the H-Y. Steve had been seen around town drunk. Then they had found Buck with that .41 bullet in his back. The money was gone. Joe Lane himself had told Sheriff Tom he had seen Steve riding for the upper bridge on Last Wish creek.

Well, Steve had been there where his hoss had tossed him. A few coins of the H-Y money had been in Steve's pocket. There had been the mark of another hoss having been ridden up to the place where the bridge was out, but then and afterward Steve had stubbornly refused to reveal the identity of the other rider. If he knew?

That had been enough for Jobe Town's first jury. The bullet from Steve's gun had killed Buck Simmons. Judge Arthur sentenced him. Thereafter, Steve remained grim-lipped and silent.

SHERIFF TOM had received many a pat on the back for his quick and efficient work on the case. Everybody knew that Ellen James and Sheriff Tom were to have been properly hitched. But there was but one provision of the law. The sheriff was the hanging official in Jobe County.

Steve was playing the harmonica again, low and dirge-like. Sheriff Tom wished they could have picked out a place for the gibbet farther from the jail. It must be hell and all to be listening to the spikes be-

ing driven into the scaffold intended for your hanging.

Sheriff Tom had been keening his ear for the horse to come slogging up in the mud. A second horse went by but did not pause. A look over at the lowest barred window proved what he had believed. Just as he was keeping a death watch over the prisoner, so someone was keeping another death watch upon him.

The outside of the window was sheltered and dusty. Now there were two fingermarks in the dust. Marks to which watchful eyes could be affixed. After the second horse, he did not hear another one arrive. He was looking at the window, so he became conscious the front door had opened by the chill air striking his back.

Sheriff Tom would have turned. An icy voice that struck numbness to his heart and despair to his soul, said evenly, "Stand just where you are, sheriff. I have a gun pointed at your back, and I would rather have both you and my brother dead than to have you hang my brother."

"Ellen! Please, you're making—"

"A fool of myself!" she cried out. "Certainly! And would you expect me to be sitting in a corner winding yarn for the great sheriff's socks—my future husband's socks? Stand still and keep your hands up, or I'll kill you, gladly, then my brother—myself—all of us!"

Her wet boots made little squishy sounds as she crossed the bare floor. Sheriff Tom's sixes were on the table and he heard the scrape of their leathers as the girl picked them up. He was understanding enough to know how it was with her, but still he was the sheriff. And a cracked mirror over the washstand gave him a passing glimpse of the girl as she shifted her own small pistol and attempted to swing his heavier guns to the floor.

Sheriff Tom went backward with a catlike spring, and without so much as attempting to turn. His long body writhed to one side, and when the little gun exploded with the shock of his movement, the lead pinged into the tin basin of the washstand.

It was then he turned, twisted with a lightning sweep of one long arm, and pinned her little gun over and back. Her startled cry and her sweet breath were suddenly in his face, with her honey-colored hair flying at all ends and dripping with the rain.

But Ellen James had not arrived there to be easily turned aside from her purpose. Having missed with the first bullet, with the second one, too, she wrenched her hand free, struck at him with the barrel of the gun. Its slash opened a furrow over his eye and blood ran into it.

"Ellen! Ellen! Stop it, kid! Go home—if you got me free, the truth would out—we don't want that—stop it kid!" Steve cried that out.

It seemed as if at the instant the iron was striking him in the face and Ellen's small hand was clawing at his throat, a few words remained sticking in Sheriff Tom's mind—

"—if you got me free, the truth would out—"

Well, that might mean anything or nothing? But Sheriff Tom was

just then busy discovering how much woman he had been about to marry. True, he could have put her out with a single punch, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he tried gripping her shoulder and catching her gun wrist at the same time. He managed to fasten onto the gun hand, but the other half of his effort was devastating.

ELLEN JAMES had come riding, dressed in a gingham dress with her brother's rubber poncho thrown over it. Her boots had apparently been an afterthought. Sheriff Tom's grip was hard and his hand could not be gentle.

First, the poncho flew open and a little package spilled from the capacious inner pocket, its thin wrappings breaking as it struck the floor. Sheriff Tom had no eye for it then, for his rough hand had brushed the poncho from Ellen's slender little figure, leaving her in the negligible things that a woman wears underneath. No doubt this was the most Sheriff Tom had ever seen of the lovely wife in store for him after the Jobe Town parson would have spoken the proper words.

But neither of them was thinking of their man and woman status at this moment. Ellen's little gun smashed across the sheriff's straight nose, and he was compelled to seize that wrist and bend her arm back until she screamed and dropped the weapon. It was then he really became conscious of the creamy roundness of her throbbing arms and shoulders, and of the fact that one most important undergarment had been almost torn away.

"Ellen! For gosh sake!" he grated. "You're losin'—you're—"

The exquisite girl was maddened beyond modest thinking.

"A hangman!" she screamed. "I'd think you'd like to see me this way! Who is there to care? What else could we do—?"

Darn her! He had trapped both her wrists. Her angry, sweet mouth was so close her breath was hot on his face.

"Bigod!" he rasped. "I'll never have a kiss any other way, so I'll take what I can git!"

Funny about a woman! Even a sister fighting for her brother's life. Sheriff Tom's clean, hard mouth crushing on her soft lips did more to quiet her than all of his fighting had done. Her tense, writhing, lithe body relaxed almost to limpness.

She was in his arms, forgetting in one mad moment that she had come there hating him, to kill, when Sheriff Tom thought of the eyes he had been sure were at the lower, barred window of the jail office. And at the second Ellen's hands were responding, were beginning to cling to the back of his neck, Sheriff Tom heard the door starting to squeak.

He put her from him roughly, catching up the rubber poncho and putting it around her. The fallen package lay concealed by his desk.

"Sure—sure!" he gulped unsteadily. "Yuh can talk with Steve for jest ten minutes—then his supper's comin'—oh, h'lo, Judge Arthur! Joe! Where yuh been all night Dep'ty Callis?"

ELLEN pulled the poncho around her. Now Joe Lane was one of the easiest human critters to describe. When you forgot all of his other features, you came back to his buck teeth. They stood out and they were yellow. They protruded now in a yellow grin.

"H'm!" sneered Joe Lane. "Steve might be thinkin' it right smart funny if'n Ellen come ridin' all the way down from the ridge with nothin' on but a poncho an' them—them—"

Sheriff Tom was so tall and so big he always gave the impression of moving slow. But somehow he had one big thumb and his other fingers gripping all of Joe Lane's mouth, including the buck teeth, and he was dangling him plumb free of the floor.

"You'd think it was a darn sight funnier, Lane, if'n when I let you drop down you wouldn't be able to chaw on your tobacco," he said in a low voice. "You ain't seein' a thing there on the floor, now are yuh, 'ceptin' that ging'am, the same which Miss Ellen took off to dry by the stove, and which you're hangin' all nice an' pretty over the back o' that chair?"

Joe Lane made such violent, pained agreement as was possible. But there was hate in his eyes as he picked up Ellen's gingham dress and hung it over the back of the chair near the stove. Judge Arthur had a kindly face with grey sideburns. His eyes were brown and warm, and he didn't look at all like a judge who could have sentenced a man to be hanged by the neck until he was dead.

Deputy Callis was sharp-voiced, small of stature, and had a thin face. He walked over and picked up the little gun that Ellen James had dropped. His beady eyes took in the new bullet crack in the washstand mirror.

Sheriff Tom looked straight at Judge Arthur and did not mince his words.

"Ellen come in thinkin' maybe Jobe County needed a new sheriff," he said. "She was thinkin', too, judge, that a bullet would be a heap better for her brother—"

Ellen James was like a small, frightened, blue-eyed child looking at these stern men of the law. The trouble was she hadn't known them as that. Judge Arthur, now riding circuit, had held her on his knee many times when she was a little tot and he was her father's closest friend.

Sheriff Tom? Why, she had seen him bucked off his first bronc when he had been learning to ride on her dead father's O-O spread. Joe Lane had been the store man who sold them goods, and trusted them in hard times.

Yet here they were, and she could not shut her ears against the dreadful hammering, the driving of spikes into the scaffold gibbet outside. Old Toby Ross pushed open the door and jiggled his red-eye bottle, empty again. Sheriff Tom, without a word, went over and gave him a fresh bottle.

"Men! Scum like that!" said Ellen. "An' Steve's got to die!"

She was looking at the firm, broad mouth of Sheriff Tom. Its fervid, savage kiss was still a bruise on her lips.

"I tell you Steve didn't do it," she said in a low, tense voice.

"Hi, sis!" called the prisoner

Tom's long arm hit him. "Ellen James rides alone tonight, and every night!" he snapped.

through the iron grating. "Ain't-cha comin' back to talk to me? I 'most had another tune on my mouth harp—"

ELLEN sobbed softly and hurried over to the door. Sheriff Tom produced his big key. As he turned, he saw the spilled contents of the opened package beside his desk. It was lacy underwear. It struck him instantly it looked like the same filmy stuff he had found caught on Steve's chaps bangle.

Automatically his big hand scooped up the things. Then, by Harry!

The laced edge of one part meant to fit a feminine thigh was torn off. He saw that it was of about the size of that fragment he had kept.

Joe Lane's buck teeth bucked more than ever as he saw the things in the sheriff's hands. Lane gawked after Ellen, and it was plain he was thinking she might have been wearing those things. Deputy Callis had his own evil ideas of what might have been seen if they had stayed outside the window watching.

Neither Lane nor Callis saw the paper package and it was clear they had the nice thought that these flimsies had come off the girl. Even Judge Arthur blinked his brown eyes.

Sheriff Tom's expression did not change, and his eyes were cold and level. He tucked the lacy underthings under his vest. A helluva keepsake, if you asked buck-toothed Joe Lane, but nobody was asking him. Sheriff Tom's brain was in a fever. Shucks! He must be loco.

Ellen had those things in the inside pocket of that poncho. And Sheriff Tom was sure the tear would match that other bit from Steve's chaps. To whom did they belong. Sheriff Tom recalled, blushingly now, that Ellen had been wearing plain white things. Not more than half a dozen girls in Jobe County ever wore the silken, lacy ones.

No matter how Sheriff Tom knew? A county sheriff has to get around and he did manage to see most of the family washings hung out to dry.

Judge Arthur was slapping the rain off his big shoulders. He was craggy-browed and kindly, but he had a chin like granite.

"Blast them spikin' that hangin' scaffold right where the pris'ner cain't help but listenin'." he said. "Steve gits whatever he might be wantin' for his supper, sheriff."

"I've seen to the same," said Sheriff Tom heavily. "Offered me a drumstick o' his chicken, he did. I been kind-a proud-a the first law in Jobe Town an' us havin' the jobs, judge. 'Pears like I ain't so a-mighty proud t'night."

"I know, Tom—sure, I know—but youth bein' what it is, it's more'n like she'll—"

"She'll go away from Jobe County as far as she can ride!" spoke Ellen's voice from the inner door. "I'd never want to lay eyes onto any o' you again!"

Her rubber poncho was hanging loose. She was like a lovely statue of wrath. She seemed to have forgotten that every beautiful contour, from the tapering curves of her youthful legs to the proud beauty of her shoulders and the kissable roundness of her upheld chin were revealed to these men. And why not?

They had seen her as a little girl, and they saw her now as a woman.

And they knew the thing that she said came from her soul.

"If it would save Steve from being murdered out there on that thing being built by drunken bums, I wouldn't be like the good sheriff and give them whiskey to keep them building—I'd—I'd go over to the saloon, just as I am, and I'd dance for all the low desert rats who—"

"Ellen! Ellen!" cried out Sheriff Tom, striding to her side and wrapping the poncho around her. "Here, honey, your dress is dry. Go into the other office and put it on."

His burning eyes swept the faces of the men around him. Judge Arthur was pitying him with his deep brown eyes. Joe Lane was wearing his most hellish yellow grin. Deputy Callis was licking his thin lips. But Ellen did not wait for her gingham dress drying by the pot-bellied stove. No. She caught the poncho around her shoulders. Her beautiful white legs showed above the tight riding boots as she went out.

JOE LANE made a move as if to follow. Sheriff Tom's long arm hit him and knocked him from his feet.

"Ellen James rides alone tonight, and every night!" he snapped. "As long as I'm sheriff of Jobe County!"

They went out, the three of them, Judge Arthur the last, giving a hard pressure to Sheriff Tom's hand.

"Some day she'll understand, my boy," said the judge.

Sheriff Tom made no reply. He was hurrying to his desk. Yes. These dainty panties he held had suddenly become new evidence. That was the bit that had been caught in the bangle of the chaps of Steve James. And it fitted tear for tear, thread for thread, to the garment from the package Ellen had dropped and overlooked.

So what sense did that make? Hardly any. Another horse had been on the scene where Sheriff Tom had found Steve James. Perhaps there had been a girl on that horse. And she had been forced to ride away when she had heard the sheriff coming, guided by Joe Lane and others.

Sheriff Tom recalled now that he had been attending a church sociable in Jobe Town with Ellen when the word of the murder had been brought. A church sociable? Yes, that was it. It being for the whole county, it had lasted for three days, and when he had ridden away on the murder he had left Ellen there, in charge of the rummage booth. Many kinds of women's garments had been for sale there.

Without even guessing their significance, doubtless Ellen had taken these unsalable, torn underthings for herself. And yet these underthings and that torn bit on Steve's chaps belonged together. You couldn't make anything else of it. Yet there had been something that Steve James would not tell.

"Tap! Tap! Tap! Tap!"

The drunken Toby Ross cursed in the rain. Too much redeye had probably caused him to mistake his thumb for a spike. Steve's harmonica was quiet now. An unmistakable sob came from the single cell. Well, you couldn't go on for-

ever laughing about the spikes being driven into your scaffold.

Suddenly Sheriff Tom cracked his big knuckles. He muttered to himself, a funny thing. "When I was a kid we useter cotch up a sunfish an' tie a thread an' a cork to his tail. Chances was nine to one he'd lead us plumb back to where the other sunfish was hidin'—either that or Jobe County's gittin' itself a new sheriff."

When the hot supper for the condemned man came in, Sheriff Tom made sure the boy who had brought the supper was gone when he carried it into Steve's single cell. The sheriff was now wearing the two .45's on his hips, well back. He left the door open and he set the basket down.

"The rope'll be wet an' awful tight in the morning, Steve," he remarked brutally. "Can't drop you far either. Jest kind-a got to let you hang an' strangle."

Steve showed the first signs of spirit. His hands flew to his throat. "Tom, you rat! That wa'n't called for! Reckon now I won't be wantin' none whatever of that chicken! If you'd—"

"My hoss is feedin' right back-a the jailhouse, Steve," went on Sheriff Tom. "An' I guess I'll hafta git me a piece-a string to tie these irons-a mine down. They keep slippin' out. Now if'n one of them was to fall inta your hands—"

"Blast yuh!" exploded Steve. "Are you offerin' me—?"

"Offerin' you?" snapped Sheriff Tom, never turning around, but being busy setting out the supper dishes. "Why should I? Couple-a years from now even your sister'll be talked into knowin' you drygulched Buck Simmons, shootin' him in the back, an' after we're married, she won't even be carryin' flowers up to Boot Hill no more—"

STEVE JAMES could not see the quizzical grin across Sheriff Tom's square jaw, which was away from him. He could hear only the hard words, the insult passed out to his sister. Steve snatched one of the guns from Sheriff Tom's leathers, bringing it down with a terrific blow.

If Sheriff Tom had been fishing for something like that, he certainly had collected more than he had expected. The crashing metal barely missed removing him permanent. He did not even feel Steve James getting the big key from his belt.

The sheriff's skull was hard. Hard enough so that he was shaking himself out of the red fog when he heard shooting. Outside men were yelling.

"Drill the dirty killer! He got poor old Toby Ross! There he goes, hell-for-leather on the sheriff's own hoss!"

Sheriff Tom didn't like to believe that Steve had got Toby Ross or any other man, though Toby wouldn't have been much of a loss to the community. But it turned out later that Toby was cold drunk up on the scaffold and when he heard the shooting, he had fallen off into the mud. Toby, being what he was, hadn't moved to pick himself up.

"Git inside!" yelled somebody else. "He must've got the sheriff, an' took his guns!"

Sheriff Tom realized that regardless of how this turned out, he probably was at the end of his string as playing the first sheriff to Jobe County. His guns were both gone and he hadn't had such a headache since the fandango over at Whangpo. To make matters worse, he discovered he was locked in his own cell.

Sheriff Tom made a wry grin. Anyway, all you had to do was to give Steve James a chance. He would take care of the rest.

Joe Lane's buck teeth were the first prominent things showing inside. Behind Joe Lane was Deputy Callis. Judge Arthur looked over their shoulders.

"KNOCKED you out when you wa-'n't lookin', Tom?" said Judge Arthur.

"From what we was viewin' in the office tonight, I wouldn't be too sure the sheriff wasn't lookin'," snarled Joe Lane. "Anyway, if he ain't cotchin' up with Steve plenty pronto, we'll be gittin' us a new sheriff. An' I 'low I know right where the killin' spriggins is a-headin' for."

Judge Arthur trapped Sheriff Tom's arm when he was let out of the cell, or it was plumb likely that Joe Lane would have forgotten all he knew.

"There's half a dozen posses a'ready ridin'," said Judge Arthur. "Cain't git nowhere's much though in this yellow muck."

"An' you said you 'lowed you knowed where Steve'd be headin' for!" snapped Sheriff Tom at Joe Lane. "Aw'right! You'n Dep'ty Callis gitcha mounts an' we'll be ridin'! How many, if any, did Steve drill 'fore he made his getaway, judge?"

Judge Arthur chuckled, "Reckon he didn't plug nobody, sheriff, an' so far as I can determine they ain't no casualties 'cept where Toby Ross drilled his finger with a hammer when the shootin' started. Looked as if'n Steve jest burned hardware promiscuous an' kept a-ridin'."

Judge Arthur looked quizzically at Sheriff Tom.

"Y' don't mean nohow to be sayin' you was aidin' an' abettin' vilatin' o' the law, sheriff?"

"Have a feel o' that lump on my noggin', judge."

Judge Arthur ran his fingers over the lump on Sheriff Tom's head.

"H'm!" he put out noncommittally. "Feller can hitcha a'mighty hard and still not be meanin' the same. Want I should be ridin' along with yuh, Tom?"

"Joe Lane said as how he knowed where Steve would be headin'," said Sheriff Tom. "An' I have my own pers'nal ideas he'd be ridin' just one of two places tonight. He wouldn't make for the home ranch, so it would be the tuther'n."

"What in time you talkin' about, Tom?"

"These things now," stated Sheriff Tom solemnly, and he produced a bit of lace and a pair of underthings.

Even so aged a man as Judge Arthur hadn't been blind all of his life.

"Many a man's followed that trail, Tom, to his sorrow," he stated sadly. "But what the hell's them things got to do with hangin'

a man, the same which we ain't got, in the morning?"

"By gosh!" ejaculated Sheriff Tom. "The same have hung a lot worse men then Steve James!"

"But they wa'n't no such thing ever admitted into evidence!" complained the judge.

"No," drawled Sheriff Tom, "an' I never heard of any female critters that would go around putting them into evidence. Just the same, they ain't more'n half a dozen pair in the whole county like 'em, an' I happen to know where this pair—"

"Good gravy!" interrupted Judge Arthur. "How you young fellers do git around! Now take in my day—"

BUT horses were already splashing up. One townsman yelled out, "The danged killer was headin' for upper Last Wish creek, the last we heered him! An' that means if'n he gits into the Mule Tail badlands, they won't be no overhaulin' him!"

Sheriff Tom heard mutterings among his townsmen. He could tell Joe Lane and Deputy Callis had not been long spreading the word of what they had seen in his office between him and Ellen James. If he failed now to return with Steve, he could roll his tarp so far as the Jobe County country was concerned.

"Whassay, Joe Lane?" snapped Sheriff Tom. "Upper Last Wish creek toward the Mule Tail badlands, or down toward the Golo Range gullies?"

"If you're really wantin' to put your loop onto Steve, I'h say the Golo Range gullies," said Joe Lane meanly, making his snarly sarcastic voice carry to others nearby.

At that, Sheriff Tom spurred his nag over. One long arm whipped out and Joe Lane came out of the saddle on the end of it. Sheriff Tom let him whip up and down twice before he permitted his flopping body to fall spang into the yellow mud.

"Anybody hankerin' for some o' the same has just listened to the song'll get it!" rapped out the sheriff. "Me'n Dep'ty Callis an' this hog-toothed sow in the mud is ridin' to the lower Last Wish creek! We ain't cravin' any comp'ny, bein' wholly capable-a takin' care of one feller that's already scared!"

Sheriff Tom could not have explained then why he rode with Joe Lane and Deputy Callis instead of with others of the posses. But it had seemed to him that Joe Lane had wanted it that way, and Joe Lane had been the hombre who had steered him to where Steve might be found the night of the murder.

Judge Arthur had been good-natured, but, even with him, Sheriff Tom knew he was not leaving the best of feeling behind him in Jobe Town. He had acted upon a crazy hunch. It had been, give Steve James his chance, and he would go where Sheriff Tom wanted him to go. It was beginning to add up even more now.

It would seem that buck-toothed Joe Lane had pretty much of an idea where Steve might go! Moreover, he seemed desperately anxious to steel the sheriff in that direction! It come to Sheriff Tom, as a rather maddening thought,

that Joe Lane might know something of the lacy underthings!

But for some reason Steve James had been protecting somebody. That someone must be closer to him than others to make him ready to walk up the gallows steps. If it turned out to be that Joe Lane knew—

SHERIFF TOM quit thinking of it. Before they had started out, he had used the one-pole phone line in all directions. Ellen James had not returned home. She had not appeared at any of her friends in town, but that was not unusual.

Perhaps she had remained around, had witnessed Steve's escape?

Ten minutes after they were riding—Sheriff Tom, Joe Lane, and Deputy Callis—Sheriff Tom believed they had selected the right trail. He could read hoss signs better than any other man in Jobe County. He was convinced that they were upon the trail of Steve James.

But what would he find there? What was it the buck-toothed Joe Lane, the ratty Deputy Callis expected to find? It suddenly dawned upon Sheriff Tom that he was merely a third party in this three-man posse. One of the three was not intended to return alive. He didn't require three guesses to name the man.

He was more than ever convinced that Steve James would be at the end of the trail. But why? If there had been signs of Ellen James riding this way, it had not appeared. Sheriff Tom recalled what he remembered of the spreading Gold Range country.

For the most part, it lay beyond the now yellow flood of Last Wish creek. Sheriff Tom, without appearing to do so, was keeping a close eye upon his companions. Deputy Callis would have knifed him in the back for the sake of his job alone. Joe Lane was smarter.

Lane would have seen to it that he was knifed in the back for both his job and political influence, but Joe Lane was not the man to do any personal knifing.

So it was a pleasant posse of three that rode down to the yellow flood of Last Wish creek just under the jumble of Gold Range.

Now Sheriff Tom Rankin was a forthright, straight-shooting sort of ranny, but he knew that sometimes a lot could be accomplished by surprising the other fellow. The roar and tumble of yellow Last Wish creek was just ahead where it emptied into the white water of the Gold Range teeth. Sheriff Tom suddenly rode between the other pair, struck a whole package of the slow sulphur matches and made a remark.

"Either-a you fellas ever happen to see these lady's frillies in the course of your perambulatin' 'round 'mong the feminine sex?"

Sheriff Tom's eyes were especially upon Joe Lane's undershot face. Perhaps it was the matchlight, but it looked as if yellow came into Joe Lane's face.

"Now how in the hell d'yuh s'pose I'd be runnin' onto pink pretties like them there?" sputtered Joe Lane. "You wouldn't be thinkin'—"

"Well, I wouldn't be trustin' any of my women-folks 'round you on a dark night," stated Sheriff

The girl was like a wildcat, alighting upon the man's back with hands clawing at him.

Tom. "Not even my gran'mother, if'n she couldn't see them horse teeth o' your'n. An' since you mentioned it, them pretties don't show no pink in sulphur match light. They show a dirty white, same's any other color. How come you knowed they was pink?"

"Shucks!" sputtered Joe Lane. "I didn't say they was pink! Come

to think of it them things all look the same on a female woman! Sure! They was white, any ranny'd knowed that!"

"Did seem to me they was nice an' pink," sighed Deputy Callis. "But maybe as you say, sheriff, I was mistakin'. But I'd a sworn to jehosephat they was pink as a newborn calf's tongue."

"You called the hand, Callis," said Sheriff Tom cheerfully. "Then things is pink, an' they showed pink as a cat's meouw in that match light. Which makes Joe Lane plumb vacillatin' an' 'fraid to say right out what he sees. Just why don't you want to go 'round identifyin' pink pretties, Joe Lane?"

THERE was considerable profanity in Joe Lane's opinion of the way he had been tricked. He wasn't sure yet he had seen anything pink. But Sheriff Tom was convinced Joe Lane had seen this same frilly lace somewhere, and that Lane recalled exactly the rounded leg it had adorned.

All of which set Sheriff Tom thinking his own bitter thoughts. Yes. If there had been murder riding with that posse of three before, there was more murder riding with it now.

It all summed up to this in Sheriff Tom's mind, that Steve James had been ready to hang to protect the name of somebody, and that this somebody could scarcely be other than a woman.

But now they were close on the surging wash of Last Wish creek where, except during flood, there was a shallow ford. This rocky crossing was now obliterated under a rolling, muddy deluge from which their horses shied.

Yet somehow Sheriff Tom knew that Steve James had crossed that ford. Once there had been gold in the scattered hills and there were still markings where the drift shafts had been. Some of these had been converted into summer and hunting lodges by the natives of Jobe County.

IT SEEMED that Steve must have made for these, where he would gain shelter, hiding and cached food all at the same time. Sheriff Tom kept wary eyes upon Joe Lane and Callis. He knew that hate and murder rode stirrup to stirrup with him, but others in Jobe County knew the same thing, so neither of these men would risk killing him openly.

But an accident?

The accident came so quickly that Sheriff Tom was caught unprepared. He was first to send his bronc down the slippery bank into the tumbling water of the creek ford. His horse's forefeet slipped and the bronc went so far down that he pitched Sheriff Tom over his head before he could save himself.

Yellow water and silt filled Sheriff Tom's mouth and nostrils. His own bronc took a clean header over him. But the second horse, ridden by Joe Lane, also seemed to take a plunging header down the steep, muddy bank.

A steel-shod hoof grazed Sheriff Tom's head and the other forefoot of Lane's bronc smashed his shoulder and drove him deep into the yellow creek. Few men could have thought so fast and acted so

quickly. Sheriff Tom's free hand set like a vise around the fetlock of Lane's striking horse and he literally caused the bronc to perform a headlong somersault into the creek.

Even then Sheriff Tom considered that all of this might have been accidental, especially when Joe Lane's hoarse voice bawled for help as he found himself floundering in the fast yellow water. Though his shoulder hurt, Sheriff Tom went after the struggling man.

Ten minutes later he had Joe Lane on the opposite bank, and Deputy Callis had succeeded in fording his own and the other broncs over.

"Made a try to git yuh out, sheriff," grunted Joe Lane. "'Most cashed in my checks doin' it, too. Now our guns are all soaked, an' if'n we cotch up with that killer, we ain't fitten t' fight."

"My guns are always dry," stated Sheriff Tom laconically. "Now there are two ways here, the fork of the Goldpan creek an' this one of the Last Wish, so's we'll hafta to be dividin' forces. Steve might-a took either one, an' both end up in some of them old drift houses where there's grub an' shelter to be had."

Joe Lane spat watery mud from his buck teeth.

"If'n it's all the same to you, Tom, I'll be takin' the fork o' Last Wish creek," he offered. "Seein' your shoulder's nigh dislocated, you can take Callis with you, an'—"

Sheriff Tom had been waiting for that. He grinned wryly.

"It ain't all the same to me, Lane, so you an' Callis be takin' the Goldpan fork, an' I'll be ridin' alone up Last Wish," he said. "I've been readin' signs, an' there's been more than one hoss crossin' down here this morning. That gelding o' mine that Steve took shows up the busted caulk of the left forefoot, an' there's been at least two other broncs. Ain't no tellin' in the rocks above which way they headed."

From the swift glances passing between Joe Lane and Callis, Sheriff Tom wasn't so sure he had made a right guess in picking Last Wish fork. Maybe their game had been to work him the same way he had been working them, but he was downright sure both wanted to reach Steve James before the sheriff sighted him.

Either they wanted to remove Steve permanent, along with what it might be that Steve was holding back, or there was something Steve knew that Joe Lane was almighty interested in discovering. So, that was the way they started riding into the scattered Gold Range hills just as it began to come dawn enough to see the gray shadow of a man and horse at a hundred yards.

SHERIFF TOM might have expected it, and he cussed himself when it happened for leaving himself open. Once separated from the others, he could easily be shot. If Joe Lane and Callis then got Steve James, they could blame the killing on him.

And if they didn't get Steve, it would be simple to report that Sheriff Tom had been gulched by Steve, and that Steve had made his

getaway. Either way, Sheriff Tom rode right out into the open draw beside Last Wish creek and left himself wide open for it.

The double crack was that of a six-gun. Even as the second chunk of lead tore into his jerking arm, Sheriff Tom realized it could not be Steve James shooting and that Joe Lane or Callis would not use the rifle on account of afterward wanting to put the killing on Steve and his hand irons.

Neverthless, swearing at himself for having been a fool not to have pulverized the pair after that "accident" in the creek, Sheriff Tom toppled from his gelding. Ten seconds later he swore helplessly. The arm hit by the bullet had been broken above the elbow. His other forearm had snapped as he tried to break his fall from the horse.

The wisp of smoke from the gun on the hill faded out. He could hear two horses clinking their shoes as they climbed. Joe Lane and Callis must have been pretty sure they had gulched him for keeps, seeing his roan gelding canter away and that he hadn't moved. And Sheriff Tom did not move for several minutes, making sure that neither of the men above had remained behind watching.

A man with a pair of broken arms is about as useful as a six-gun with the cylinder empty. Every move was terrific agony and brought a groan from Sheriff Tom and a new variety of oath. It was impossible to manage either hand. He waited at least five minutes, never moving, before he gave a low whistle.

The roan gelding had been grazing nearby and he threw up his head. He trotted back and nosed around Sheriff Tom. At the same time, Sheriff Tom had listened until he had guessed the direction taken by Joe Lane and Callis. They had come back down into Last Wish creek draw above him.

After several tries, Sheriff Tom got one foot hooked into the stirrup strap. His rubber poncho provided some relief as a sled for his body, but not enough to prevent his clothes and his skin being dragged. Only his control of the gelding prevented him from being bumped and brained on some of the rocks.

It seemed to Sheriff Tom he had been dragged thus for hours, but perhaps it was much less, for the gray spot of the sun in the rainy sky was not very high when he saw the hewn log building that jutted out of an old mine shaft. This was perhaps two hundred feet up the slope from the draw.

Releasing himself, Sheriff Tom sent the gelding away. He could see thin smoke spiraling from a moss chimney of the abandoned mine building where it sloped back into the hill. He did not have to guess that Joe Lane and Callis were inside. Their broncs grazed outside with their leathers down.

IT SEEMED impossible for a man with two broken arms to climb. The sweat of hell bathed Sheriff Tom's body before he had inched his way half to the top, grinding himself upward on his back, pushing with his feet and careful to make no sudden movement that would send him all the way back—to his death.

He was two-thirds on the way to

the top when he heard the first sound of a human voice. And it struck him with a damnable chill. For this was the clear, defiant voice of a woman.

"Never! Never! Never! I have left the note—we will die here together first! You cannot come in—he will not come out! I will kill him if he tries!"

Though clear, distinct, that voice came from far back in the old mine building. Sheriff Tom realized that it had reached him because there was a slight opening back there where the timbering entered the hill and the dirt had fallen away.

But the voice? That of itself was incredible. Somehow, the soul of Sheriff Tom had been sick—sick with something he had not wanted to believe. But the thought had been there, ever since he had discovered the scrap of silken underthings had matched. He had even built up a defense for Steve James, the loyalty of a man who would rather swing on the gibbet than have scandal hurt a family high up in Jobe county.

There came muffled curses in a man's voice. Then there could be made out the snarl of Joe Lane between his buck teeth. It sounded as if somebody was twanging on a tightly stretched string.

"Yuh darn well know yuh was crossin' me up alla the time an' yuh was doin' a lot more'n pretendin' to be playin' sweet on 'im! Yuh little scut, didn't I see them there pink silk under—?"

Sheriff Tom did not wait for the remainder of this outburst from Joe Lane. A great light was breaking upon him, but what the hell and all could a man do with two busted arms? He was sure now that Steve James was back in the shaft of the slanted mine building.

"Tie a thread to a sunfish, an' he'll lead plumb to the others," muttered Sheriff Tom grimly. All the time he was hunching his armless way along the side of the mine building and trying to reach a spot from which he could heave himself to the roof.

There came the clear-cut voice of Steve James.

"Yes, Lane! Blast yuh! Make one move back here an' I'm drillin' yuh for keeps! Sure I was keepin' quiet to save her good name among Jobe County folks, an' that's a lot more'n you ever was thinkin' 'bout when you was usin' her to bait me along—"

Things were beginning to add up a little in Sheriff Tom's mind. The darn fool kid! He had been going to be hanged by the neck until he was dead before he would have spoken the name of the girl.

Well, it seemed that Steve had the upper hand back in the long mine house temporarily. If Sheriff Tom could but reach the roof unheard, perhaps he could at least slip one of his unfired sixes down to that girl with Steve?

THERE! He rolled from the ground to the roof! Instantly, he wished he were miles away from this place! Wished that he were dead!

"You're comin' out, Steve James!" snarled Joe Lane. "Comin' out with your paws lifted 'an empty! The gal's goin' back with me, an' she's keepin' her trap closed for the rest o' her life, or I'll know why! An' if'n yuh think

you're doin' any blastin', just lis-'en!''

"Please—please—don't—you're hurting me so—''

There was husky agony, and this was the voice of another girl. The voice of Ellen James herself. Then the devils had her down there?

"An' what that hifalutin' sheriff'd like to done to your sweet, little sister, is the same what we're goin' to do here an' now, only wuss!'' yelped Joe Lane. "Lissen, Steve James, an' see if'n you don't come a-walkin' with your paws in the air!''

After her first screams, there were only low moans from Ellen. But the evil-minded Joe Lane was picturing her with words.

"Over here in the dark back o' these timbers, Steve!'' he squawled hoarsely. "Right over here, where yuh cain't noways put no lead pizen, an' with Callis standin' ready to salivate yuh if'n yuh show up shootin'! Your sweet, little sister, Steve, who wa'n't noways good 'nough for any o' us boys 'ceptin' that high-toned Sheriff Tom, the same which is now buzzard bait down the trail! Comin' out, Steve?''

Sheriff Tom was tearing aside the bark roof, trying to see inside, but he was forced to work with his feet. He could tell the pair of fiends had Ellen a prisoner right under him. Moreover, he didn't believe even Joe Lane would go the limit of what he was threatening. There were things that tough Jobe County wouldn't tolerate from a man.

But Joe Lane was making it plain enough. It was evident that Steve James and the other girl were sheltered in the back of the mine building and could not be driven out. Now that the other girl had thrown in with Steve, Joe Lane and Callis had no intention of letting them escape alive.

"Hardly nothin' on under her poncho but them purty underthings when she was in Sheriff Tom's arms, an' she didn't seem to mind,'' was Joe Lane's taunt. "Hain't even wearing the poncho now, Steve. Givin' yuh one chance to come walkin', then all you hafta do is lissen. Gimme a li'l kiss, Ellen!''

When the girl moaned, Sheriff Tom could picture her slim white body. He knew now why she had been carrying those underthings from the rummage sale at the church sociable. Ellen had been bringing the package to the jail to try and get the straight story out of Steve before it was too late.

But the thing going on under that roof made Sheriff Tom forget even his broken arms. He could hear the lurid oaths of Steve James. The little moans of the girl who was his heart and his life, down in that filthy mine shack with Joe Lane and Deputy Callis.

"No, Steve! No!'' cried out the girl with him. "They only want to kill you—us! They'll—oh, they'll do the same to her and we can't stop them!''

PERHAPS it was a strangled gasp from Ellen, almost directly under him that gave Sheriff Tom the strength to drive his powerful legs into and through the mossy roof. His weight carried him down into the darkness.

Both of his arms were useless and he was half stunned by the fall. But he could see the limp white body of Ellen lying on the floor. One boot heel drove into the back of Joe Lane's neck, flooring him, temporarily paralyzing him. Deputy Callis was caught by surprise, but he turned, shooting. Lead burned and scored Sheriff Tom in half a dozen places.

But ahead of Steve James himself, her clothes only tatters that scarcely concealed her beautiful figure, came the other girl. She was like a flying wildcat, alighting upon Deputy Callis with teeth and claws. As he went down, she was upon Joe Lane as the latter was arising, attempting to get at his hardware. She got his gun first.

Steve James and Sheriff Tom could not have stopped it if they had wanted to do so. Steve James was not given even the opportunity to shoot. That female hellion was determined upon but one thing. She was out to exterminate the man who had talked her into tricking Steve James into a love affair with her, getting him drunk and putting him in position to have the dry gulching and robbery of Buck Simmons framed on him.

And, as seems to be the fate of womankind, she had discovered that Steve James was the man she really loved, especially after he had intended going hell-bent to the gallows rather than talk about her own torn underthing on his chaps. She smashed at Joe Lane's head viciously, again and again, with his own gun until he fell and lay still.

Sheriff Tom directed Steve to hogtie Deputy Callis, then carry Ellen away from the scene.

Joe Lane died there, died the hard way, in the semi-darkness of the old mining building. When it was all finished, the posse headed by Judge Arthur did not trouble about Boot Hill, thinking the draw of Last Wish creek as suitable a place as any for the battered remains of buck-toothed Joe.

JUDGE ARTHUR sat high on the black stallion of which he was almight proud. He looked with a puzzled air from young Steve James to the girl beside him. Her face was blood-streaked and all she had found to wear was a blanket from under a saddle.

"A fine how-to-do, the upstandin' datter o' a circuit judge o' the great Territory o' Oklyhomy, traipsin' 'round an' impoundin' felonious persons," stated Judge Arthur pompously. "Connivin' an' abettin' in the fractatin' of the dignity an' the majesty—"

"Wait thar a minute, judge," interrupted one of the posse. "Hain't majesty got suthin' to do with that King George tryin' to fo'ce us inta drinkin' tea arter we'd l'arned from the Injuns how to make our own co'n likker?"

"H'm'm!" growled Judge Arthur, "As I was saying, what an' all d' you mean, Belle, a datter o' mine, to be affordin' aid an' comfort to a fugitive convict, the same which I had sentenced to be hanged by the neck, and for which Jobe County's already spent a passel o' gold money, not countin' ten bottles of redeye? What do you mean—?"

"Jest a minute, Daddy," interrupted Belle. "'Low I done all the aidin' an' abettin' by hitchin' up

with Steve down to Whangpo unbeknownst to nobody, an' this Joe Lane was keepin' me prisoner up here on Last Wish creek until after Steve was hanged, figgerin' I wouldn't be able to be tellin' then how I'd helped git Steve drunk an' put some of that Buck Simmons gold money into his pocket for Sheriff Tom to find. An' then Sheriff Tom found some of my—well—something cotched on Steve's chaps—"

JUDGE ARTHUR faced Sheriff Tom severely.

"Seems to me for a county sheriff, you know too danged much about what goes on down under in Jobe County," he stated. "I'll be overlookin' your misfeance an' mal—mal—er—malicious devilment which I seen with my own eyes in your office, providin' Ellen James agrees here and now to look after your goings-on in the future. Seein' your arms are busted, anyway, she won't have no trouble for some time to come. How about it Ellen?"

The slender girl was already close to Tom, fussing with his dangling arms.

"We'll know where Tom keeps his hands for a few weeks, Judge Arthur," she smiled. "After that, I'm afraid I couldn't give any guarantee."

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TEXAS BRAND

By JEROME SEVERS PERRY

"Reach high!" came the girl's command.

THE late Wyoming night was scented with a dampness that fore-shadowed rain. Ominous clouds drifted over the rolling prairie, forming a ceiling of dark dough stirred by yeasts of wind. In the distance a coyote howled dismally.

Fitfully asleep on the hard ground beneath a cottonwood, Del Buchanan, long-legged cowpoke from the Rio Grande country,

stirred within his saddle-blanket and dreamed of the long trail from Texas over which he had come; the trail whose end was now in sight. Riding hard all by himself on two hundred head of short-horn beef-cattle had been a tough, wearying job; a he-man's job. Now, encamped near the bank of swollen Cayuse Creek, he was close to the finish-line.

Bedded down in the sweet grass that edged the stream, Del's short-horns had been quietly resting. Now, however, a quiver of movement rippled through them. One red cow, heavy with calf, raised her head and snorted a plaintive bawl of suspicion.

The warning sound brought Del instantly awake. He sat up, throwing aside his blanket. His hand crept to the heavy .45 slung low against his right hip. His eyes tried to tunnel through the blackness.

In the distance, hoofbeats were drumming upon the ground. Nearer, over a rising breast of land, the rangy cowhand from Texas thought he detected a shadowy shape approaching on foot. He scrambled up, unlimbering himself to his full six-feet-three.

"Who's there?" he called sharply.

The shadowy figure materialized, taking on form and substance. It was a girl! And she was racing madly toward him.

Her piquant face seemed abnormally pale against the darkness; her body was a slim, vibrant picture of youthful loveliness despite her faded blue denim shirt and her ragged levis. She came panting toward Del, her yellow hair flying.

His surprise was mingled with a sharper sensation of admiration as his gaze took in her lithe young figure. Her shirt was in tatters, ripped away from her shoulders as if by clawing hands. Glimpses of white skin were disclosed by the tattered rents in her shirt, and her bosom rose and fell rapidly with her labored breathing. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two.

Frightful danger menaces the girl, all because the Texan's strategy has back-fired. Now, through flaming gunsmoke, he must undo the harm he has caused

Before Del could utter a word of greeting, she was upon him. The breath of her whisper was hot against his ear. "Listen! Are you Buchanan from the Double-Circle spread down Texas way?"

"Why, yes," he answered slowly. "What—?"

"I've come to warn you!" she flung out desperately. She was so close to him that an aura of warmth from her young body seemed to reach out and encompass him in heady intoxication. She quivered with an excitement engendered by palpable fear, and her lips were kissably tremulous.

"You've got to round up your cattle right away; drive them across the creek before Wade Cargile—"

SHE got no further. Suddenly the thunder of oncoming hoofbeats grew nearer in swift staccato. Over the breast of land, the shadowed silhouette of a mounted rider loomed out of the night. With a choked, gasping exclamation, the girl raced past Del and vanished in a clump of cottonwoods.

He tried to stop her; but his hand slid from her shoulder. Then she twisted away from him and was gone, before the oncoming rider could spot her.

The Texan whirled on his heel; saw a hard-featured, wide-shouldered man with the frigid eyes of a killer slide from the saddle of a lathered roan. Six-gun drawn, he walked forward.

Del's lips tightened. "What's on your mind, pardner?" he demanded.

"You'll find out quick enough!" the broad-shouldered man's voice held a snarling, rasping quality. "Where's the girl?"

"What girl?"

"The blonde girl that just rode up here. Don't tell me you ain't seen her, because I done followed the trail-marks of her cayuse."

Buchanan's jaw jutted. He remembered the blonde girl's evident fright at the approach of this beefy man; recalled how her shirt had been torn. He shook his head slowly. "I ain't seen no girl," he lied.

The heavy man seemed almost convinced. "No? Well, all right then. We'll talk about you, instead. Where you from?"

"Me? I'm from the Double Circle, down in Texas."

"What are you doin' here with these beef-critters?"

"Well, now I don't rightly know as that's any of your business," Del drawled in a tone whose softness concealed tempered steel.

"None of your lip, cowpoke. When I ask questions in this neck of the woods, I get the right answers—or else somebody eats lead! Now talk!" The stranger's six-gun came up with menacing deadliness.

Buchanan's eyes narrowed and glittered green flame beneath half-lowered lids. Down in Texas, men respected that glint in the lanky cow-hand's eyes—and walked softly when it appeared. The sign didn't fail now.

With a movement almost as fast as the lightning that flickered on the horizon, the Texan's fists smacked out. His left took the heavier man on the gunwrist, knocking the menacing hog-leg downward. His right bashed up in an uppercut that blasted home to the beefy man's jaw. Then, before the snarling stranger could raise his six-gun again, Del Buchanan tore in with a raging fury that carried his adversary backward under the savage *thud-thud-thud* of pummeling fists.

In another instant the beefy one would have gone down. But just as Buchanan poised himself to deliver the knockout, the situation changed.

OVER the hill came three horsemen, riding hell-for-leather. Streaks of flame stabbed at the night from their roaring guns. The

Texan froze; saw the trio of newcomers unfork and hit the ground running. They surrounded him with smoking gun-muzzles. "Reach high!" came a rasping order.

Amazingly, it was a woman's voice that spoke the command. As he raised his hands slowly, Del stared at her. Like the two men who had arrived with her, she was dressed in masculine shirt and blue levis tucked into high-heeled boots.

But there was nothing masculine about her features or her body. Framed with raven-dark hair, her face was an ivory oval of cruel beauty. Under her shirt, her figure was almost buxom; her whole body had a feminine cast that bespoke maturity in every contour.

But there was nothing feminine in the grim red slit of her mouth. She half-turned toward the beefy man. "It's a good thing we trailed you," she sneered. "Looks as if you were getting the worst of it." Her eyes glowed cat-like in the gloom.

"Me gettin' the worst of it from this Texas galoot?" the heavy man snarled. With that, he leaped at Buchanan with upraised, reversed Colt; brought the weapon's barrel down against the Texan's unprotected temple. Blinding pain cascaded through Del's brain. He staggered, managed to stay on his feet only through sheer, dogged will-power.

His assailant grinned sardonically. "Reckon mebbe-so you'll sing a softer tune now, smart guy!"

Buchanan wiped away a trickle of blood that streamed down into his eyes. Fast on the draw, he knew he could have yanked out his own .45 and poured a slug through the beefy one's belly before that worthy could pull trigger. But the Texan also realized that the moment he made such a play, the brunette woman and her two grim-visaged companions would fill him full of lead.

He shrugged; faced the man who had slugged him. "Looks like you're callin' the turn, pardner. Just what was it you wanted to know?"

"You heard me the first time I asked, fella. Where are you headed with these beeves?"

"Why—I'm drivin' 'em to Jim Warlock's Triangle-W spread, just over Cayuse Creek here. You see, a long time ago Warlock done a favor for my boss down in Texas. So now the favor's bein' paid back—on the hoof, so to speak."

The heavy man sneered. "So you think you're headed for the Triangle-W, huh? Well, take another think, cowboy. You're turnin' around right now; an' you're moochin' back along the same trail you came. We don't allow no Texas cattle up here in Wyoming."

"Who says so? I got a clean bill o' health from the inspectors at the Kansas line. This stock ain't carryin' no disease."

"That don't make no difference. I'm tellin' you. An' I'm Wade Cargile—meanin' I'm king o' the roost in these parts. I'm servin' you notice right now; there'll be guards posted at the ford across Cayuse Creek. An' the first man or animal that sets foot in the water—gets drilled plumb center!"

Rage smoked up in Del's throat. "I've heard tell of you," he said

grimly. "Run the Crossed Arrow outfit, don't you? An' plenty notches on your smoke-wagon, too."

The Texan's voice grew velvety. "You're pipin' the tune, I guess. Reckon I know when I'm licked."

Cargile's grin was wolfish. "You're smarter than you look, cowboy. An' if you want to hang onto your health, you'll be gone before dawn. That's all." He turned to the woman and her two companions. "Let's find that yellow-headed spitfire. She's somewhere close—"

"No! We're heading back to the ranch right now!" the black-haired girl snapped. The quartet backed away, swung booted feet into stirrups, mounted. Then they wheeled their broncos and spurred off into the night.

Watching them as they vanished over the hill's crest, Del's hand went to his throbbing temple where Cargile had slugged him. There was nothing subdued in the Texan's narrowed eyes or the thin-drawn line of his lips. Instead, his movements bespoke war-medicine. He'd heard of Wade Cargile, all right; a killer, sure enough. But the sort of killer who waited until a man's back was turned before slinging lead. Up here where the law was scarce, a rat like Cargile might get away with such stuff—unless he crossed the trail of a man like Del Buchanan. . . !

The Texas man picked up his blanket, rolled it. Hefting his silver-inlaid saddle, he slung it over his sleek black bronc and tightened the belly-cinches. A lot of unanswered questions were buzzing around in his mind. Why didn't Cargile want him to herd his Double-Circle beef over Cayuse Creek? And who was the slender, golden-haired girl who had so mysteriously appeared with her warning, only to vanish again?

AS IF in response to his thoughts, he heard a soft call in the darkness just before he forked his horse. "Texas man—wait!"

Buchanan turned; saw the blonde girl running toward him. With each racing step, flesh quivered whitely through the rents in her shirt. He faced her as she came up. "Yes?"

"Listen—are you going to let Cargile and his . . . woman . . . run you off without fighting back?" she demanded hotly.

"Before I answer that, mebbe-so you'd better explain a few things about yourself, miss," he answered quietly.

"I can explain plenty!" she flung back. "I was spying around Wade Cargile's ranch-house tonight. I heard him planning to come here and order you out of the country. I started here to warn you—but he happened to step outside and catch me before I could get on my horse. I—I fought with him, managed to get free. But I reached you too late to do much good. . . ."

"An' why should you be spyin' around Cargile's spread?" Buchanan asked slowly.

Her chin went up defiantly. "I'm Leila Warlock of the Triangle-W, that's why! Jim Warlock's my father—the man you're taking these cattle to! Dad's had

plenty of grief this past year—all because of Wade Cargile. Cargile runs the Crossed Arrow spread for a bank down in Santone; gets paid a percentage of the profits. So he's been expanding his outfit right and left; gobbling up all the surrounding land he can lay his hands on. The more beef he markets, the more pay he collects."

Buchanan nodded. "Keep talkin', girl."

"Well, Cargile has scared out most of the other ranchers from this section; all except my father. And things have been plenty tough for Dad here lately. Cargile's men have been rustling our stock; picking brawls with our riders and killing them until we can't get a single waddy to work for us. It's reached the point where the bank's ready to foreclose on us—unless we can produce additional security for a renewal of our loan. We've been counting on these Double Circle beeves from your boss in Texas to keep us going. But if you let Cargile bluff you away, we're through. . . ."

Her shoulders held a forlorn droop and the sight made Del's heart race; she was so helpless, yet so deliciously feminine that for the moment he was inarticulate.

She must have misinterpreted his silence; must have thought that he was about to refuse to help her. She took a faltering step nearer to him; touched his arm. "If—if you get those cattle to my father, I—I'd see that you got paid back . . . somehow."

He sensed that she was making a deliberate play to enlist his aid; he knew intuitively that she wasn't the sort who'd throw herself into the arms of a strange man the first time she met him, unless forced to it by circumstances stronger than her own self-respect. . . .

But the appeal of her eyes and the nearness of her delectable form sent raging torrents of longing into the Texan's soul, so that for a brief moment he forgot everything except his desire to hold her in his arms. Then, with a muffled exclamation, he caught her about the waist and pulled her against him.

At first, she started to resist; then she became passive in his embrace. He could feel the vibrant warmth of her slender form, the yielding tenderness of her lips, tremulously upraised, parted. He lowered his mouth against them, tasting the intoxicating nectar of her kiss. His arms tightened as he crushed her close with an ardor almost beyond his control.

AND then he remembered himself; released her. "You don't have to make a play like that, Leila," he whispered gently. "I reckon I ain't the sort who'd expect. . . . pay. . . ."

"You mean—you'll throw in with us? You'll help us fight Cargile?"

Buchanan smiled grimly. "Cargile won't gobble up no Triangle-W land as long as I got gunpowder to burn! Now, you get back to your father, pronto. Tell him I'll be comin' with my cattle before dawn!"

She caught his arm, pressed it thrillingly to her in a grateful gesture that filled him with leaping tingles. Then she turned, raced beyond the clump of cottonwoods. Instants later, astride a slim palo-

mino, she rode over the hill.

The Texan forked his own black bronc, rode down toward the sweet grass where his short-horns were bedded. With his quirt he smacked at rumps and flanks until the herd was at last on the move in bawling protest. He headed them toward a wide, shallow place on Cayuse Creek; and as he drove them at the ford, he leaned far down from his pommel.

Suddenly, from the streambank, a roaring report split the night; a saffron lightning of flame belched from a six-gun's muzzle. Then another, and another—from widely separate points. Del swore in his throat. There were at least three of Cargile's men in ambush up ahead. Under cover, they offered no target; whereas the Texan, out in the open, was at the mercy of a vicious cross-fire.

He knew that it would be suicide to try to rush the ford. A swift alternative leaped into his mind; a wily, crafty stratagem. He raised his voice. "Hold your fire! Let's palaver!"

Out of the darkness came an answering voice. "Okay, Texas. I'm comin' out to meet you. But remember—two more guns is aimed at your belly in case you pull anything funny!"

A man strode forward with cocked six-shooter. It was one of the pair who had accompanied the brunette woman a little while back. He glared up into Del's face. "What's eatin' you?"

"I want you to lead me an' my cattle to your boss. I aim to deal with him."

"Deal with him?" The man asked.

"Sure. Since he won't let me run my beef to Warlock's Triangle-W spread, I got to get rid of 'em some way. Mebbe-so Cargile will pay me a little money an' take the critters off my hands."

The Crossed Arrow man's ugly face split suddenly into a knowing grin. "I get you. You're sellin' out to the highest bidder, huh? Well, that'll probably suit Cargile. all right. Come along. Me an' my pardners will help you herd your stock to the Crossed Arrow corral."

Two more leering, mounted cowpunchers appeared. But even as they commenced hazing Del's cattle across the ford, a bitter, disillusioned cry came from the darkness—a woman's scornful, whiplash voice. "So you double-crossed me, Texas man! You—you yellow, spineless coward. . . !" Then the receding drum of hoofbeats. . . .

Buchanan's jaw tightened. So Leila Warlock, instead of heading for her home ranch, had remained behind long enough to overhear; and now she considered him a turncoat! The knowledge galled him; but he held his silence. The time would come when he could show his hand, prove to her that he had not betrayed her trust. . . .

UP FORWARD, a flicker of light grew in the darkness. It marked a window in Cargile's ranch-house. Moments later, Buchanan's cattle were hazed into a corral behind the sprawling buildings; and one of the Crossed Arrow riders pounded on the front door. "Wade! Hey, boss!"

The door opened. From his saddle, Del drew a sharp breath as his

narrowed eyes behind a silhouetted feminine figure. It was the brunette girl—Wade Cargile's "woman." She was no longer in denim shirt and blue jeans. Instead, she was clad in an orchid-colored negligee; and with the light behind her, the sweeping curves of her figure were half revealed.

The Crossed Arrow cowpoke spoke to her in a lowered tone that did not quite carry to the spot where Del Buchanan was astride his black bronc. But the Texas man saw the girl apparently issuing terse instructions; and an instant later, she raised her voice. "You—Texas! Come on in the house."

Buchanan dismounted. As he strode forward, he noticed that the three waddies who had brought him here were now slipping around to the rear. He heard the creak of saddle-leather, the sudden thump of hoof-beats. He frowned thoughtfully; and then he was over the threshold, facing the girl.

She closed the door, looked him over. He noticed that she held a six-gun in her right fist. Her brows went up. "So you decided to throw in with us, did you, Texas?"

He nodded. "That's my idea. Where's Cargile? I want some money for my beeves."

She grinned. "Cargile? He and the boys are out on a little errand. You're staying here until they get back—just to make sure you haven't any tricks up your sleeve." She half-raised her gun.

Buchanan's thoughts raced. This was a contingency he hadn't expected. Time was precious; he had a job to do—and the absence of Cargile and his crew offered a chance. But the unexpected obstacle of the brunette girl and her six-gun was something he had to hurdle before he could get under way. He studied her.

There was no doubt about it; she was beautiful in a harsh, blatant fashion. Through the thinness of her negligee, Buchanan could discern alluring lines of her mature, strongly muscled figure. He forced an admiring smile. "Wade Cargile's a fool to pass up a girl like you for that Warlock blonde," he murmured.

She flushed; darted a sharp glance at him. "What do you mean by that?"

He chose his words carefully; tried to make his lie sound convincing. "Haven't you guessed? Cargile's in love with Leila Warlock. Anybody could see that. After he gobbles up her old man's property, he'll probably grab her too—and give you the air."

"You lie!" she blazed.

"Mebbe-so. But me, I like my women dark—an' nice figured, like you."

She flushed. "Meaning—?"

"Meanin' that you an' I could go places—plenty!—if things was different. S'posin' I was runnin' this Crossed Arrow spread, instead of Cargile. You'd been queen o' the range, baby."

"I already am!"

"Yeh? But not for long—if Cargile gets his hands on the Warlock girl." Buchannan grinned. "But then, mebbe you wouldn't like me. I'm kinda rough."

SHE narrowed her eyes. Something in the way he was looking at her seemed to ignite tinder

within her veins. His boldness, his penetrating stare, seemed like a bold caress.

She lowered her six-gun. She smiled. "Maybe I like men . . . rough!" she challenged.

In spite of himself, his muscles tightened at sight of her. He went toward her; started to grab her.

She jabbed her pistol against him. Suspicion flared in her smouldering, dark eyes. "You're trying to trick me!"

"Sure. I'm trying to trick you into . . . this!" Suddenly he crushed demanding lips upon her mouth.

Flames of sensation seemed to course through her. She stiffened; and suddenly she was against him, unmindful of the inadequacy of her attire. His embrace tightened, squeezed. He felt the quiver that rippled through her soft body. An answering tingle electrified his own senses.

Her eager breath was warm against his mouth; her kisses as eager as his. . . .

Now, at last she was off guard and Del Buchanan's moment had come. He leaped to his feet, snatched at the revolver in her limber fingers. "Now, blast you—" he roared.

She went white; gasped out in pain as he jammed the gun's muzzle into the yielding softness of her body. "You—you double-crosser—!"

He slapped her across the face, stunned her. Leaping backward, he yanked a looped lariat from a peg on the wall; used it to tie her wrists and her ankles. "That ought to hold you!" he grated. And he hurled himself out of the house.

HIS black bronc was still just outside the front door. He flung himself into the saddle, spurred toward the rear corral. Panting, he opened the gate; hazed his milling short-horns out upon the trail. Warlock's Triangle-W spread was just two or three miles across the rolling prairie, he knew; and with singing quirt he urged his cattle through the night.

Off to the left, he thought he heard the sound of galloping riders pelting furiously through the darkness; thought, for a breathless instant that pursuit had started. But the faint drumbeats died in the blackness; faded into silence. Grimly, Del Buchanan hazed his herd to greater speed.

A long time later he saw a yellow light dead ahead; knew that he had reached his goal. It was the Warlock ranchhouse; and the Texan grinned sardonically. He had outwitted Wade Cargile's outfit; had brought his short-horns to their destination despite the Crossed Arrow gang's opposition. He whipped the bawling beeves into the Triangle-W corral; closed the gate. Then he spurred around to the house, dismounted, pelted toward the front door. He pounded on the portal. "Hello inside! Jim Warlock! Leila—!"

In answer, there came a low, choked moan of pain from within the room. Harsh, weak, stricken . . .

Buchanan's heart constricted. Something was wrong. He backed away from the door, gathered himself, went catapulting into the woodwork. It splintered inward. The Texan stumbled into the room. His eyes widened—

A grey-haired man lay on the

floor, bound and gagged. Blood seeped from a gash across his skull. His eyes were staring, glazed in helpless pain.

Del went to his knees; whipped out a clasp knife. He sawed through the older man's fetters, snatched away the gag. "Are you —are you Jim Warlock?"

"Y-yes. . . ."

"What happened? Where's your daughter?"

"Wade Cargile and . . . his waddies . . . come here . . . a little while ago. . . . They jumped me . . . tied me up . . . took Leila way from here. . . ."

"God!" the Texan's breath was a rasp of fury. "But why—what?"

"Cargile said . . . he'd hold Leila . . . until I agreed to . . . sell out my spread . . . to him . . . for a hundred dollars. . . ."

"The measly skunk! An' if you don't sign over, he'll . . . he'll . . ."

"God knows what he'll do . . . to Leila. . . ."

A SAVAGE oath leaped to the Texan's thinned lips. Those hoofbeats he had heard a while ago —that must have been Cargile and his riders, carrying Leila toward the Crossed Arrow ranchhouse.

Leaning close to the old man, Del spoke in a harsh whisper. "Listen! Pull yourself together! Saddle up a bronc an' ride for town—you hear me? Get a posse together—an' bring 'em to the Crossed Arrow spread! Hell's goin to pop!"

"You—you—?"

"I'm headed for Cargile's place —right now!" The lanky Texan leaped for the door, hurtled out into the night. In one flying leap he hit leather, dug spurs into sleek flanks. The black pony reared, whirled on hind feet, plunged down the rolling trail.

Wind-borne mist whistled past Del's grim, tense face as he leaned low over his pommel. Reins loose in his left hand, his right slid toward his .45; eased it in its holster. Overhead, the dark clouds were lanced with lightning flashes; a rumble of thunder danced against the sky.

At last, after what seemed hours, the Crossed Arrow ranchhouse loomed ahead. Buchanan slid to the ground, went careening toward his destination. Suddenly from within the front room, there came a shrill cry of terror—of feminine fear. Leila Warlock's cry!

Then the brunette woman's harsh snarl: "So you thought you'd ditch me and take up with this yellow-haired heifer, eh, Wade Cargile? Well, when I get through with her you can have her —but she won't be pretty any more! I'm putting my brand on her—"

Cold agony of apprehension wrapped slimy tentacles around Buchanan's heart as he plunged ahead. His own stratagem, his own lie, had placed Leila Warlock in peril! He had told the black-haired woman that Wade Cargile wanted Leila; and now the brunette was about to wreak revenge—the ruthless vengeance of a woman scorned—

"God!" the Texan panted. He sped desperately onward. From inside the house came Cargile's hoarse shout: "You can't do that—!"

"Can't I?" the dark-haired woman's voice held harsh triumph. "Well—watch me!"

Buchanan reached the open front door. For a split-instant he froze at the sight that met his staring eyes. The brunette woman had apparently been released from her fetters by the returning Crossed Arrow hands; and now she stood in the room's center. In her left fist she held a six-gun; kept Cargile and his henchmen at bay. In her right hand there was a cherry-glowing branding-iron—the Crossed Arrow brand, its metal heated almost to whiteness by a charcoal-brazier.

On the floor huddled Leila Warlock. Her clothing had been ripped, half revealing her sweetly-rounded, maidenly figure. Pallor of terror was spread upon her delicate features; her eyes were twin pools of stark fear. Her hands covered her trembling bosom. She shrank back as the other girl relentlessly approached.

In another second, the glowing iron would hiss and fry into recoiling feminine flesh—

Del sobbed out a curse—and went catapulting through the doorway. His smoke-wagon roared a bellowing blast of flame and lead. One Crossed Arrow man went toppling to the floor, a slug through his brain. The others whirled; hands snaked toward holstered shooting-irons.

But the tall Texan was already upon the brunette woman. His left fist smashed out, caught her on the jaw. She swayed, collapsed, dropped the glowing branding-iron. Buchanan reached down, grabbed it by the handle. He straightened up.

Wade Cargile was charging at him, gun upraised. The Texan hurled the red-hot iron full into the beefy face of the ranch-boss. Heated metal fried into Cargile's eyeballs with a hissing, sickening sound. Cargile shrieked in his agony; dropped in a sprawled heap, clawing at his blinded, tortured eyes.

BUT the other Crossed Arrow punchers had recovered themselves now. Guns drawn, they were leaping in—

Del fired once—at the kerosene lamp. The room was suddenly plunged into darkness. And now the Texan stooped, found Leila's cowering form. He swept her into his left arm, carried her toward a rear door which he had spotted just before he shot out the light.

Out into the night he raced with his delicious burden. The bunk-shack loomed before him; he slammed into it, kicked the door shut. Holding the shuddering girl close, he sped to a window; smashed out the pane with the butt of his .45. Outside, Cargile's waddies were streaming toward the bunk-shack, guns stabbing fire.

Del Buchanan took careful aim, squeezed his trigger. One of the attackers doubled over; sagged to the earth. He fired again, dropped another man. Then the hammer of his Colt jammed!

He crouched low as bullets whined through the window, slugged into the wall behind him. Shielding Leila Warlock's body with his own, he peered desperately over the sill. He saw an arc of

flame coming through the air; a lighted torch that landed on the bunk-shack's tinder-dry roof. "We'll smoke him out!" came a snarling cry.

The Texan groaned; smelled an acrid odor of smoke seeping downward from the ignited roof. "We're done, little Leila. . . !" he whispered grimly. "But I—I want you to know that I—I didn't turn against you. I pretended to sell out to Cargile, so I could get my herd to your dad's corral—which I did. I—I wish you'd believe me, girl, because I . . . love you."

His arm slid around her waist; it was warm and firmly-rounded in the darkness. And then she was giving him her lips. "I—I believe in you!" she whispered. "And I —I love you, too. . . ."

Gently he cradled her in his arms, thrilled to her responsiveness as she clung to him. . . . And then—

IT SEEMED as if the heavens had been split apart by detonating dynamite. A jagged streak of lightning stabbed downward; thunder shook the earth. Abruptly, the sky opened its floodgates; a cloudburst poured its torrential waters in a slanted, sheeted deluge. The bunk-shack's roof hissed, sputtered, as the flames were beaten down and extinguished by the downpour.

Del leaped to his feet. From outside, there came a new sound—the barking roar of six-guns! Out of the rain, a hard-riding knot of men had appeared as if by magic. "Your dad—with a posse!" the Texan whispered.

Shouts. Shots. Harsh oaths; the cries of wounded, dying men. Then suddenly—silence.

Buchanan raced for the door of the shack, kicked it open. A man came pelting toward him. Old Jim Warlock. "You—Texas! Where's Leila? Where's my daughter—?"

She went running toward him. "I'm safe, daddy—safe—thanks to . . . Del Buchanan. . . ."

The lanky Texas man grinned through the rain. "You clean out the Crossed Arrow bunch, sir?"

"Every last one; either dead or handcuffed, son. Cargile's done for; an' his woman—well, she stopped a bullet, somehow. I—we —Leila an' I owe you plenty, lad. I reckon I won't have to buck the Crossed Arrow spread no more. Looks like peace had come to this part o' Wyoming."

Del Buchanan smiled. "In more ways than you know," he agreed gently. "You see, your old pal—my boss down in Texas—he done bought the Crossed Arrow outfit from that Santone bank. That's why he sent me up here with them short-horns for you. I was to deliver 'em—an' at the same time, see what was goin' on at the Crossed Arrow. I reckon, now that Cargile's dead, I might wangle me the job of bossin' the Crossed Arrow ranch."

Leila's eyes were shining as she came timidly toward Del. The pelting rain had soaked the remnants of her tattered garb, so that it clung revealingly to her youthful curves. "I—I think I'm going to like you for a neighbor, Texas man," she whispered.

His heart leaping, Buchanan swept her hungrily into his arms.

He hurled himself inside, gun drawn. By the moonlight, Cleon was dimly visible, her form pleasantly silhouetted.

By John Prentice

THE red-haired girl's white beauty was strangely out of place in the pine-walled second floor room of the only hotel in the little cow-town, Broken-Axe. She had exquisitely shaped legs; and though her figure was a series of curves of heart-warming roundness, half revealed by that moon mist of an imported gown, Cleo Selden suggested feline suppleness.

AVERAGIN' OFF

Most of her was reflected in the gilt-framed mirror which was a grotesque note in that crude room, until she turned to eye the man who stood behind and to one side of her. The twist of her body further separated the edges of that frail gown, but "Average" Parker still regarded the glass.

He was not studying his thin face which looked like jutting crags modeled in bronze; he was watching his long fingers whipping a deck of cards into submission, and his own eyes could not catch up with his skill.

"You jughead!" Cleo flared, dumb critters, but they's a-honin' tuh hold me up with a frozen deck. This is practice fer self-defense."

"You'll never get anywhere," the red head taunted. "You're just a tin horn!"

"I won't eh?" Her jibes had begun to sink in. "We'll soon have damn' near enough tuh buy up the mortgage on that Lazy H outfit, out Skeleton Creek. Now what do yuh think o' tin horns?"

Her hazel eyes narrowed, glittered calculatingly then she exclaimed, "Really, darling, did you see old Hank Pendleton? What'd he say?"

They framed Average Parker well in Broken-Axe. They made him out to be a card cheat, but even with the girls in the set-up, things sort of came out even, after the smoke cleared away

piqued by his blindness to her fascinations, "if you'd fan your pasteboards that way at Red Mike's place, you'd have a fortune now!"

"Aw, listen, honey," drawled the cowpuncher whom fate had made a gambler, "robbin' pore, pit-eyed cowpokes ain't my business. Shore, sometimes I lose, but they's a percent favorin' the house, and a square game is bound to win by that there law of averages."

"Average" Parker again made the cards hiss and whirr.

"Then why," Cleo impatiently demanded, "this showing off when you never make any use—stop flipping those cards!"

"Because," explained Parker, still unruffled, "they's often slick *hombres* comes in lookin' like

"Nuthin' tuh do but raise a bit more *dinero*," Parker declared. "Course it'll be tough going, with Bill Watley raisin' hell because he'll have no more chanct tuh run his critters over onto the Lazy H spread."

She listened as he detailed the unproved rumors that connected Bill Watley with the murder of Clem Harris, the former owner of the now abandoned Lazy H.

Harris, faced by the expense of supporting a daughter in the east, had plastered the ranch with mortgages until it became topheavy. And when the cattle business went bad, crusty old Hank Pendleton was stuck with a sour loan. He'd be glad enough to sell the mortgage to anyone who'd bite at the hoodooed Lazy H!

But despite the last few lean years, Bill Watley had made mon-

ey, right along, and was becoming more powerful, more arrogant.

"And so all you have to do is raise the money," Cleo sighed, hearing the end of Parker's account. She lazily stretched herself, tantalizingly displayed her tempting curves. Her arms twined about him, and the ripple of her body made his blood race as she murmured, "You're awfully clever, darling. That's why I get all out of patience, when you give suckers a break they don't deserve."

"Yuh might," he chuckled, taking an armful, "give me a chance."

Cleo spoke Spanish and English, but she never could remember the word for "no" in either language....

AND for a while, Average Parker forgot that he had left Montana because a committee of citizens had claimed that he was entirely too skillful with a gun, even though he never drew first. He could have defied them by hiring out as lead-slinger for some cattle baron, but that went against the grain; so he became a gambler at Red Mike's Thirst Coffin, still lazily insisting that he was jest average, either with cards or Colts.

Finally, however Parker remembered that he had business at the Thirst Coffin. He disentangled himself from Cleo's arms, wiped her rouge from his lips.

"Yuh shore got me all painted up," he chuckled, holstering his bone-heeled smoke poles and heading for the door. "An' don't wait for me too late. I heard they's going tuh be big doin's in Broken Axe tuhnight."

Cleo blew him a kiss, brushed the scattered cards from her dressing table, and set about restoring her make-up. That done, she crept to the window, watched the front of the Thirst Coffin for a moment, then slowly opened and closed the shutters; once, twice, three times. Her smile was a red mockery as she curled up in her chair, waiting.

THERE were bigger doings in Broken Axe than Average suspected. As he emerged from the side door of the weatherbeaten hotel, a bottle spattered to fragments somewhat up the alley, and behind the rickety board fence; but Parker, instead of starting at the sound, scarcely flashed a gray glance to his left, and kept the other flank under his eye. A vague stirring, a scarcely definable shifting of blurred shadows warned him, whipped to life a sixth sense that cried of peril.

He was whirling as yellow flame spurted from the gloom. Lead raked him, slugs peppered him with splinters torn from the hotel siding; but as Parker dropped in a huddle to the trench washed out by rainfall that had poured from the eaves, a bone-heeled smoke pole was dancing in his hand.

He poured hot lead at the knot hole from which the concealed lurker had fired; for an instant the alley shook with thundering guns, and the howl of the unseen sniper through whose chest Average had blown a section of board fence. And then a diagonal fire laced him, lower, seeking out his scanty concealment.

It had happened faster than the lurkers could perceive; they did not know that one of their number

had fallen, that Parker, though down, was granite cold with slaying wrath.

"Got the —— —— polecat!" hooted a third, breaking cover, hosing the alley with slugs as he charged.

Then he spun, clutching his stomach; he collapsed, a single .45 driving a belt buckle against his spine. Parker's hogleg shifted, but quick as he was, he could not quite catch the surviving fugitive, skylined for a split second as he cleared the fence in full flight.

There was a yell, a gasp, a thump, but the rattle of tin cans in the rubbish strewn lot beyond the fence told him that one man was escaping. Then a horse's hoofs clattered, swiftly dying out in the distance.

"But he'll shore have tough ridin'," grinned Parker, "if I creased him where I reckon I must've!"

Men from the main street now came pouring into the alley. They froze, hands rising, as they caught the glint of Parker's leveled guns; but recognizing familiar faces, he holstered his irons, and joined in examining by match-light what he had blown out of ambush.

"Hell, how should I know why this jigger didn't like me?" he countered, and then, from the other side of the fence, strong hands boosted the second dry-gulcher into the alley.

"Yo're bleedin'!" exclaimed the weather-beaten old marshal, One-Eye Collins, his single frosty lamp shifting to Parker's reddened shirt.

Parker shrugged, chuckled, and said, "That jest proves what I was a-tellin' that gal. Two o' these here sidewinders is ready fur a spade-pattin' on the chest, me and t'other one's creased, though I reckon I could ride more comfortable than him. Sort of averages off—two daid, two purty near good as new."

AND thus, content with his logic, Parker headed back toward the side entrance of the hotel, intending to get a fresh shirt; but One-Eye Collins detained him, saying, "Them two jaspers yuh plugged has been hangin' around Broken Axe fer the last week, over at the Diamond Palace. Looks sort of like they was interested stoppin' yore dickerin' with old Hank Pendleton fer the mo'gage on the Lazy H."

"The dickerin' with Hank was jest about finished this afternoon," grinned Parker. "Sort of makes me wonder if Bill Watley is a mind reader."

"Kin yuh prove that?" demanded the marshal.

"Shucks! If I could prove it, I wouldn't be a-botherin' with a fresh shirt ontil I'd got this'n plumb dirty, would I?" countered Average, bounding up the side stairs.

As he reached for the knob of his door, he heard a click behind him. He whirled, guns in line as he faced the sound. Then he sank back on his heels, sweat cropping out of his forehead.

It was Cleo, stepping from her room just across the hall.

"Woman," he sighed, lowering his guns, "it's shore bad luck, startlin' me these days. Yuh came damn' near gittin' shot jest then—"

"Oh—what happened—I heard—"

"Don't yuh worry, honey," he cut in, eyes brightening as they took in the loveliness between her waist and the frilly yoke of her gown. "I didn't want tuh scare yuh with these here blood stains, but now yuh've done seen 'em, yuh might help me plaster up my ribs."

HALF an hour later, Parker strolled lazily into the Thirst Coffin, nodded to Red Mike, the proprietor. The cowpokes draped along the bar set aside their whiskey glasses to eye him. Others, on the dance floor, forgot their hip wriggling girls and joined in the concerted stare.

"Buy me a drink, baby?" wheedled a bleached blonde, breaking from her partner and sidling up to him until plump curves brushed him with her flaunting movement.

Average flipped a silver dollar to the bar, but drew away from her close pressed knee, shook off her caressing fingers.

"Yuh better stay clear," he warned, overhearing the mutterings that the music did not quite overwhelm: ". . . . coroner's got tuh call it suicide on purpose. . . . them jaspers should've knowed better. . . . but anybody Average drags down on don't never git a chanct tuh tell his side of it. . . ."

That last was ugly. His reputation was following him. But as he turned from the bar, eyes sombre, his glance reached into a far corner of the pavilion and lingered there.

That black-haired girl, Win Hayden, was having the devil's own time trying to keep a greasy cowpoke from finding out what brand was on her garter clasps. She had lovely legs, and who wouldn't be playful with a shapely armful like Win; but the fellow was going too far!

"That gal don't belong here," muttered Average, for a moment forgetting the menace that threatened him. It riled him, seeing that sweet-faced creature trying to play the game and still retain a bit of self-respect.

His blood quickened as the cowpoke's fumbling scored in an advance from both directions. While Win vainly tried to get her short skirt down over her knees, a heavy hand had ripped a seam of her bodice. That left very little unexposed. For a moment she did not know what to cover first; then her hand smacked home like a pistol shot.

Too late to block the view, she'd at least made a job of averaging things up, Parker decided as he crossed over to her corner.

"Bub," he drawled, jerking the waddy from the bench, "if yo're jest handlin' this lady like yuh was takin' lessons on a flute, yuh'd better take her outa here, sorta refined-like."

"But I'm not—" A flush raced down to her bosom.

"Yuh don't look like yuh was, m'am," conceded Average. "I jest told him, in case yuh might be."

"Listen, yuh slick-ear!" roared the waddy. "Fer two cents—"

He made a fumbling reach for his holster. Win cried out, and recoiled; but Average did not bother to draw. His fist popped home, landing the cowpuncher on the

floor, spurs well up over his ears, pistol skating into a corner. As he recovered, well sobered, he began to realize whom he'd tried to smoke out. With a howl, he plunged for the door, not even pausing to retrieve his weapon.

Average was tingling all the way to his boots as Win thanked him; and he walked away with devastating memories of firm young curves.

"She shore has nice eyes," he thought, completing the upper half of his reminiscence.

THEN he became all business. Bit by bit, cowhands came in to pit their luck against his. Lopez, a scar-faced Mexican from nowhere, staked a heap of gold on the table. Baldy Flynn, a grim old cattleman who had just collected for a carload of beef, joined with a bigger pile.

Average, face now frozen as his granite gray eyes, fanned the whispering cardboards, paid off, raked in, set aside the house cut on each pot. He was tolerated, almost liked in Broken Axe, because he played a square game, because he wore his guns at his belt, instead of carrying murderous derringers up his sleeve.

A burly, double-chinned man with a bulbous nose wedged himself into the sixth spot of the game: Bill Watley, eyes stormy, mouth twisted in forced amiability. He laid down a poke that fairly tipped the table.

"Try this," he challenged, iron grating beneath the hearty rumble.

"I'm sort of like them there dance hall girls," drawled Average Parker, including the newcomer in the deal. "I got tuh take on all and sundry."

"How yuh mean that?" growled Watley.

"Like it lays, Bill," smiled Average. "An' yo're welcome as hell because I'm jest a-workin' here. How many, Lopez? An' yores, Baldy?"

The smoky air grew tense. Those who muttered among themselves at adjoining tables wondered if Average had really meant it when he told One-Eye Collins, the marshal, that he did not have a shooting suspicion of Watley's connection with the attempted drygulching.

The play finally became a four-handed duel. Average, hard pressed, had to bring his reserve stake into play. Lopez and Baldy were just stringing along, ballast to provide hands enough to keep the game going.

That set Average wondering. A greenhorn wasn't the only one who could be whipsawed. Watley was beginning to become jovial. . . .

Then the tide shifted. The gold at Watley's corner was dwindling. Lopez was coming in with bigger bets; but Parker had them on the run. And when he raked in a heavy pot, Watley leaped to his feet.

"Time fer a new deck!" he growled. He was within his rights, yet the implication was raw, coming just as his luck broke.

"Yuh kin git yore own, Watley," Parker pleasantly agreed. "Or some of those Red Mike's got behind the bar."

"Anything *Red Mike* deals out," was the significantly emphasized retort, "is plenty good by me."

PARKER could not take exception to Watley's confidence in the man for whom he worked; though the insinuation was rank enough to make him reach for iron, he ignored it, unwilling to add to his unfortunate reputation as a gun-slinger. But Red Mike was already on the way, eyes blazing with wrath.

"Here's yore deck, Watley!" he rumbled, slapping the fresh pack on the table. "Yuh reckon I'd allow a crooked dealer in my house? Do you?"

"Shucks, Red," laughed Watley, "keep yore shirt on. I'll play with the old one."

Average had been worked into a ticklish spot by his enemy's suddenly relinquishing a right. Those old cards had to go out of play.

"Yo're a-goin' tuh play that fresh deck, Watley, or I'll stuff it down yore throat!" he threatened, voice low and vibrant. "Put that mussed pack down!"

"Jest keep yore shirt on, Average," protested Watley. "They ain't really mussed a-tall, an' shucks, I done hurt Red Mike's feelin's, so I'm a-playin' with these here ones, jest tuh show him I know his house is square."

That point had to be well taken; and the deal was made.

And then Parker, picking up his hand, knew that anyone betting against him would lose toe-nails and eye-teeth. Four aces and a king!

Better yet, Watley was betting heavily, seeing him and going better. No doubt that he had a fistful, but the highest possible four would have to be queens; only a straight flush could beat Average. That, however, would knock him a-glimmering; strip him clean. The Lazy H and all the ex-cowpuncher's plans for himself and Cleo hung on that hand.

Lopez and Baldy were out, but tense, sweat gleaming on their foreheads as they watched Average sliding out his pile. "See you, and call it."

He fanned out the four aces. He caught the momentary flash of Watley's eyes, the relaxation of his tension; only a flicker, yet distinct enough to convince him that the cattleman had a straight flush. That sliver of time was endless; then Watley roared, "Yuh thievin' polecat!"

Watley had turned up, not a straight flush, but *four kings!* Four, and a king was backing Average's winning aces! Chairs scraped. Breaths sucked in. Then silence; men crouched on the floor as Average Parker stood, stony-faced, hands in sight.

He hadn't drawn; he never drew first.

Watley knew better than to pull iron. This spoke for itself. By the rule of the game, he took the pot as surely as though he had held a straight flush. The dealer was responsible.

Good-bye, Lazy H—and Average Parker, the honest gambler. Red Mike, now white with rage, was struggling with two men who kept him from drawing a gun on the empty-handed tinhorn who had brought disrepute down on his house.

Cowhands, loafers, barflies gathered as they saw that the next line would not be written in lead. All eyes centered on the tinhorn caught

with the goods. Then One-Eyed Collins came in, saw and heard.

"Yuh better mosey along, Average," he rasped. "I don't want no more shootin'. Yo're a menace, jest bein' aroun' here, regardless of how that extry king got intuh that deck."

"Here's my smoke poles!" flared Average, unbuckling his belt. "Watley, shuck yore iron—"

That was rage speaking. The discredited gambler was in no position to challenge anyone. The crowd saw only a dangerous man unarmed, banished from broken Axe as a renegade.

"Yuh would shuck yore guns, yuh skunk!" frothed Red Mike, breaking loose. "Ride him out on a rail—"

"Run him out—the tinhorn—git tar'n feathers—"

They surged forward, pocketing One-Eye Collins. Mob indignation blazed higher every instant.

AVERAGE went down in a mill of fists and clutching paws. Crowded, he could not defend himself; yet they jammed each other in the rush, and none could get a firm grip or a knock-out punch. The whirl of wrathful men was moved by mob lust that the individuals would have condemned.

As they neared the door, Average took advantage of a cross current in the whirlpool, drove home hard fists; but resistance was futile. Blood blinded him. He sank to his knees, dazed by the glancing blow of a pistol barrel.

He clawed at a gunbelt, blind fury whipping up his last flare of strength. The buckle tongue tore the leather. There was a hoarse yell at the thought of Average Parker with iron in his hand. They were packed too tight too dodge, to draw—but before he could snatch the gun, before they could stamp him into the floor, a Colt roared. A hanging lamp crashed to the floor; a back bar mirror shattered.

There was another ripping blast; lead screamed, flame lanced the half gloom. Good God, was Parker heeled? Where was he? And then other guns blazed, panic stricken men fired blindly, cursed, howled frenzied warnings. They broke, stumbling, lurching for the door.

A soft hand caught Parker's wrist as he twisted, half senseless, from the stampede. A woman was helping him through that howling half darkness. He was crawling up stairs; regaining his feet as the mob scattered to hunt him through the streets.

But Parker was in a room above the Thirst Coffin. The girl was Win Hayden, her streaming hair covering more of her shapely body than the tatters of her gaudy gown. She had precipitated the stampede, and had won.

"It worked," she gasped. "That cowpoke's gun you kicked into a corner — Good Lord — I was afraid—"

Average missed most of what followed; and when the room ceased whirling, he noted that the riot had subsided, that blood and grime no longer caked his face. Win Hayden, having doctored his cuts and bruises, was retouching her damaged make-up.

She had the trim, clean lines of all fine creatures. He forgot his plans of escape; forgot everything in the fascination of watching the

sinuous play of those slim arms, and the lift of sweetly modeled curves protesting against their filmy swathing.

Then he blinked the haze from his brain, wondered at the delicate tan of her arms and shapely shoulders. Odd, on a dance hall girl. . . . and finally, he remembered that he was getting glimpses distinctly offside. She didn't realize he was regaining his senses, that the mellow light was casting shadows that modeled her softest fascinations into blood-tingling relief.

"If it's jest the same to yuh, ma'am," he said, "supposin' I sashay out the window and give yuh a chance to pretty up in private. I ain't been hammered blind."

"Oh—" She drew the robe together. "I just had to get fixed up and go back, before anyone missed me."

That, Average reckoned, wasn't the answer at all. There was no music coming from below. The whole pack was still out hunting him. He gained his feet, leaned over Win's shoulder to blow out the lamp; but that momentary downward view set his heart hammering anew.

SHE started at his sudden move, and the flurry of garments released a sense-stirring little hint of perfume. For a moment, she was quite close, her warmth perceptible, her lightly pressed body almost like a caress against him.

"With the lights out, I won't be skylined when I take a dive from the window."

"Don't go—that's foolish!" she protested. "When they cool down, they'll realize you didn't doctor that deck. Just as I knew."

"Did yuh really?" He caught her arm. "How come?"

"The way you stepped on that drunken waddy when he was forcing himself on me. Average, if you didn't ring in a frozen deck, Watley did."

"Did yuh see—?"

"Just a hunch. Now don't be stupid and get yourself killed. Maybe I can find you a job on some spread. I hear things in this dance hall. There's going to be a demand for an honest fighting foreman—"

"*Honest!*" He thrust her aside, stepped toward the sill. "Who'd hire a disgraced gambler?"

Before he realized her intent, she interposed. He tried to sidestep, but she clung to him, her trailing garments confusing his hands as he sought to shake her away.

"You idiot, I know what I'm talking about—" she panted crowding closer.

He instinctively revolted against brusqueness. Then he didn't want to break her hold. He began to realize how sweetly curved and supple she was, how enthrallingly her firm flesh rippled, there in that long sweep from knee to hip. He drew her closer, and learned still more. . . . and though he was no longer edging toward the window, Win still clung tight, breath coming in gasps.

"I'm stayin'," he said, voice suddenly unsteady. "If yuh kin talk sense—" But he gave her no chance; he kissed a sigh from her lips, then felt her shiver as she returned the caress.

As they moved away from the window, she was murmuring dis-

connected protests. She tried to draw away as he caught at the enfolding gown; then an inarticulate little cry choked in her throat as his mouth crushed down on hers. . . .

But when their kisses finally had to be spaced with breath, Win persisted in her refusal to give him any details of the outfit where he might get a fresh start.

"Anyway," he compromised, "if I could jest prove Watley got me all riled so he could slip in a frozen deck, I'd have him acrost a barrel. I'm askin' yuh—what's yore hunch?"

Win answered, after a long silence. "There's a red headed girl he likes, and you were in the way."

"Cleo?"

"Yes. I've heard things. And if he likes her, he'd surely try to get you out of the way."

That was a new idea. It took time to digest; and Average was mortally weary. The darkness became a drowsy sweetness. Maybe Win was right. . . . the mob would cool down. . . .

HE DID not know how much later it was when he sensed the emptiness, even before he struck a match and found that Win was gone. The scrape of fiddles, the tinkle of the tin piano below, the rumble of voices told him that the Thirst Coffin was going full blast again.

Win's promises and predictions now seemed hazy and meaningless as all the preceding unrealities.

"She was jest sort of foolin' me to keep me from diving out and gittin' myself plugged full of holes," he pondered; and even if she had had some prospect in mind for him, it would take weeks to materialize. He couldn't continue hiding in her room.

"An' that little poke I hid in my diggin's jest in case fast travelin' was in order," he pondered, "will come in handy."

He searched the room, found the revolver with which Win had precipitated the panic in the saloon. It was empty, but he had some .45 cartridges in his room. He shoved the gun under his belt, and in a moment, Average was letting himself down to the roof of the adjoining building.

Broken Axe, except for the saloons, was asleep. As he approached a dark alley leading to the rear of the hotel, Parker sized up the mustangs at the several hitching racks. But first he needed a stake. So he advanced, and presently, after a moment of eye straining to probe the gloom, he reached the side entrance of the hotel.

Average, stealthy as a cougar, outwitted the treacherous hall flooring, and reached his door without a betraying sound. He couldn't risk a word with Cleo; his flight was something he could not share with a woman, and Win's whispered hints, coming back to his recollection, did seem plausible.

But this was no time for bitterness. Or so he thought until he heard the stirring and murmuring that filtered past the transom of the room across the hall. A woman was sighing, catching her breath after having been very thoroughly kissed—the kind of kiss that made the toes twitch. . . .

Cleo, carrying on while a mob hunted him! Average Parker's brain exploded in a red blaze. He

hurled himself against the flimsy door. The panel splintered, and the tongue of lock ripped from its socket; all so unexpectedly that he was pitched headlong into the room.

That made the surprise three cornered. There was no lamp light, but the rising moon was more than enough. By its light, Cleo was dimly visible; her long white legs, her slender arms clinging about broad shoulders, and hair a ruddy flame in the silver glow from the window.

"What the tarnation hell?" boomed a wrathful voice, drowning Cleo's shrill yeep.

BILL WATLEY; even before he recognized that bellow, Average identified the broad bulk of the man whose boots scraped the floor as he whirled, snatching the gun belt lying on the table.

But his hands froze, half way; he recognized Parker, whose craggy face was full in the light, grim behind a Colt that had blossomed in his hand as he recovered from his plunge through the door.

"Yuh son of coyote," said Average, "take yore choice—finish reachin' fer that hawg-leg, or get out in public an' tell the town yuh slipped in a frozen deck when I was too riled up tuh have my wits with me."

He ignored Cleo. She was only a spindle of white flesh scarcely veiled by that frail gown. Her bosom slowly sank as she finally exhaled a breath. Parker lowered his gun, but Watley still did not reach for iron.

"Mebbe yuh'd rather talk?"

"I didn't stack that there deck!" Watley's voice was unsteady; he knew he would be finished if he tried to draw, finished also if he made the admission Average demanded.

And then without warning, a gun barrel reached from the hall to prod Parker's back. One-Eye Collins growled, "Drop it, Average—I done told yuh tuh mosey along!"

The gambler dropped his empty gun. Watley straightened up as the marshal lowered his own Colt

"Now yuh git, right now!" continued One-Eye. "Take my pinto hoss. He's at the blacksmith shop, whar yuh kin grab him easy."

They had Parker across a barrel now; but he was light-headed from futile wrath. Instead of moving toward the door, he cleared the room, fists blocking Watley's instinctive reach for a weapon. The pop that followed was a sledge hammer wallop that fairly lifted the cattleman up and backward. Watley crashed through the window, his yell ending in a thump.

"Now I'll get me that hoss, marshal," gasped Average; but as he turned to the door, lantern light flooded the hall, and heavy feet came tramping toward Cleo's room.

Red Mike and three cowpunchers blocked the way. They were heeled, and wrathful.

"Keep yore hands down!" roared One-Eye, covering them before they could draw. "Ain't goin' tuh be any more mob stuff. He's leavin'—"

"He ain't leavin'!" growled Red Mike. Then, getting an eyeful of most of Cleo's family secrets: "But this yere gal is—look-it this deck of cards I scooped up after the ruckus. They warn't

tramped on nor nuthin'. They's smudged with that warpaint she uses, an' I seen Watley sneakin' up here. An' if that ain't two an' two, nuthin' is. If Average was a-goin' tuh stack a deck, he'd be slick enough tuh keep red offen a blue card!"

Parker made a dive for the window. He connected just as Watley, grunting and puffing, regained his feet; but Red Mike's rasping voice, carrying like a bugle, had warned him. Watley ducked down an alley; and then a horse's hoofs pounded the hard earth.

"I'll git that sidewinder if it takes me till judgment day!" swore Parker, reaching for Watley's abandoned gun belt; he was interrupted by a thump and a tinkle.

He had knocked a buckskin poke, stuffed with gold, from the table. Watley's pile; the night's crooked winnings.

"This," declared Average, seizing the money, "sorta changes things. Marshal, I'm still takin' yore hoss, but I'm a-comin' back, pronto. Yuh gents kin expostulate with this lady."

Without waiting for questions, Parker pounded down the hall, forked a pinto, and galloped down the main street. He was heading for Hank Pendleton's ranch house, all that the old money lender retained of his once extensive holdings, now that he had retired from cattle raising.

HALF an hour's gallop brought Average to his destination. A light was gleaming within. That was odd at that hour. He dismounted, advanced on foot; and as he approached, he saw a horse at the hitching post. He didn't recognize the beast, so he warily stepped to the veranda. Parker had ridden faster than the news of his partial vindication, and he wanted to avoid dangerous misunderstandings.

He peeped through a window, and into a room at the corner of the house. Hank Pendleton, grizzled, warped with rheumatism, sat facing Win Hayden. On the table was a rumpled, legal-looking document with a red seal.

"Ma'am, yo're crazy!" protested the money lender. "How kin I put a second mo'gage on the Lazy H when I'm plumb sunk on the fust one? Even if Average Parker's goin' tuh manage it fer yuh, it's too much risk."

She had ridden to clinch the deal before Hank heard of the riot at the Thirst Coffin; but trying to talk him into a second mortgage was insane! That left Parker groping; but only for a moment; then he shuddered, too horrified for wrath.

There was no mistaking the slanted glance, the inviting smile, the sly wriggle as Win edged closer, caught Hank's warped hand and cooed, "Please, Mr. Pendleton. You can't lose . . . and you're too young to think that life is just a matter of *money*. . . ."

Hank blinked, first incredulous, then eager. He straightened, twisted his tobacco stained mustache; and croaked, "Ma'am, if yuh figgers thataway—"

He was beginning to find that the revealing yoke of Win's silk blouse covered something more fascinating than documents.

"Oh, Mr. Pendleton," she gasped as his awkward arms circled her yielding form; and the

catch of her breath threw tantalizing curves into relief against the sheer fabric.

She snuggled closer, murmuring in his ear; but Average petrified by the shamelessness of that lovely girl to whom he was deeply indebted, heard what she said: "I'm half frightened to death—I've never—"

Which brought a youthful gleam to the money-lender's eyes, and he answered, "Don't yuh worry none! Hank Pendelton allus treats a lady right. . . ."

Parker couldn't see very clearly just how Hank was treating her; but he made a good guess . . . . he no longer wanted the Lazy H. . . . he wanted nothing but a fast horse, heading for the border.

"But you'll sign the papers?" she said, voice quivering.

"Not ontil yuh proves yuh mean what yo' say," countered the wary old codger, "Ladies change their minds—"

He took a closer hold, silken curves just filling his arm.

Win sighed, "Then look the other way, just a second, while I —no, put out the light. . . ."

The money-lender was breathing hard as she squirmed from his arms.

PARKER turned from the window. He had the Lazy H in his pocket, but he was sick of everything. He moved slowly, and with scarcely any perception of time; but he knew that only a moment could have elapsed when the show opened in the corner room.

"Hey, what the tarnation—leggo that mo'gage!" cackled Hank, with a brand new kind of passion shaking him. "Yuh hussy—"

Win yeeped. A chair scraped the floor. The confusion of scuffling was broken by the tinkle of glass. There was darkness for a moment, then a lurid glare as the oil of the shattered lamp blazed up.

Average wheeled, bounded to the window. Ignoring the pool of fire, Hank was trying to recover the document Win had seized. Her blouse was in shreds, her shoulders were raked by those gnarled skinny hands. She broke loose as Parker made a dive for the sill, but her skirt slipped its moorings. The tangle about her ankles tripped her. She pitched headlong, a whirl of half bare flesh and silken legs.

Parker was alive once more. She had tried to trick Hank, but not sell herself! He sent the sash crashing upward; but as he cleared the sill, a shower of glass rained in from the window of the other wall. Someone else was moving in!

Hank whirled, made a dive for his belt, but his warped hands were slow. A voice boomed, "Drop it, or I'll plug yuh."

Watley plunged into the room, gun leveled. He leaped to snatch the document from Win, who was regaining her feet; but Parker, stepping into view, shouted, "This way, Bill!"

The startled invader jerked to his left, triumphant face suddenly white and sagging. He was caught, and armed; he could not beg off. The smoky hell became a thundering confusion. The long, ripping blast of two dancing guns was punctuated by the smack of Hank's weapon, drawn during the distraction. Parker won the exchange but he dropped to duck the money lender's spray of slugs.

Watley, doubled on the floor, triggered his gun in an insane fury. But as he slumped, dead, Parker popped up, and caught Hank with an empty gun.

"Cut it out, yuh fool!" he shouted, jerking him to his feet. "Before we burn!"

WIN followed him through the window. It was too late to save the ranch house; but as Parker laid the wounded money-lender under the cottonwoods, he said, "Anyway, here's the *dinero* fer the Lazy H. Yuh'd oughta knowed no gal her age'd fool around with an old coot like you. Though it still leaves me stumped, figgerin' out why everyone's trying tuh steal it? That don't do no good!"

He glanced at Win; and she answered, "I'm Clem Harris' daughter, and I finally came out here to find out why dad's ranch had been hoodooed. Before he died, he'd written me that while the mortgage had of course been recorded, the county courthouse had since then burned down, and maybe Hank Pendleton had forgotten to have it recorded again. Which Hank had, as Watley also must have known. People are careless out here."

She laughed softly, then she reddened to her ankles, and almost stammered, "But you saw—everything?"

"Plenty," chuckled Parker. "Tuh convince me yuh was only foolin' Hank, which would have a point, seein' as how the papers warn't on record." Then, boosting Hank to Win's horse, Parker laughed and said, "Yuh know honey, everything's done averaged out tuhnight, even the women folks in this here deal!"

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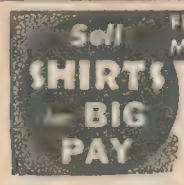

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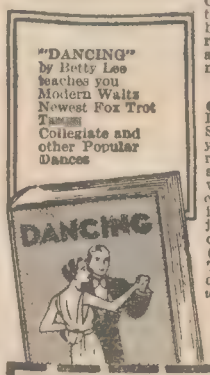

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Of ROMANTIC WESTERN published BIMONTHLY at Chicago, Illinois, for April 1, 1938.
State of New York (
County of New York) ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Kenneth Hutchinson, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the ROMANTIC WESTERN and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:
Publisher, Trojan Publishing Corp., 125 East 46th St., N. Y. C.
Editor, Kenneth Hutchinson, 125 E. 46th st., N. Y. C.
Managing Editor, none
Business Managers, Nathanial Sokol, 125 E. 46th St., N. Y. C.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual, must be given.)
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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.)
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4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

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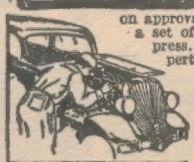

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